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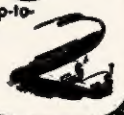

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With the pronouncement of another "last" in the Old West, we think again of other recent "lasts" which have happened during our own life time. The death of Bill Tilghman, famous frontier marshal, who was shot to death back in the Roaring Twenties—and by a drunken prohibition enforcer, no less! The death of the great gun-magic lawman, Wyatt Earp, peaceful and quiet, in his bed some thirty years ago, in Oakland. The passing of Bat Masterson, back in New York City, two thousand miles from the frontier he knew and loved, over thirty years ago.

Living men who have served as frontier marshals are few and far between these days. There's old Cimarron George Bolds, who served as law enforcement agent in Dodge City under Bill Tilghman. Cimar-

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

ron George is very much alive, writing an occasional Western article for us and creeping up to ninety . . . and he was around when the buffalo still roamed the plains.

There are some Civil War veterans alive, and they too are living links with a historic American past. Perhaps your own grandfather—if he's still alive—can remember hearing about these stirring things which happened in the dramatic building of our Western country.

But these living, physical links with the Old West—these transitional bridges between two historical epochs—are becoming rarer and rarer. The Virginia and Truckee is the last Old West railroad in the world. As these "lasts" go we can only mention them with nostalgia for the great and glorious past they bring to our minds.

Much in the same vein, we at *Ace High Western* try to recreate in these pages every month the stirring, exciting days, described vividly in the hard-hitting words of the top Western writers in the country. We hope you enjoy meeting these salty old-time characters that they create and get a bang in watching their heroic efforts to carve empires out of tangled desolation.

We hope that we may be able to bridge the gap between past and present with the fiction of our writers, carry you back to those thrilling, long-gone days, perhaps as well as these living links do now. That is our mission each month in *Ace High Western Stories.*

Next month you'll see novels and stories by these top-hand Frontier writers: Harry F. Olmsted, Clark Gray, Giff Cheshire, and many others. Don't forget to get your copy immediately. It'll be on sale September 27. Don't miss it!

Until then—*Vaya con Dios, amigos!*

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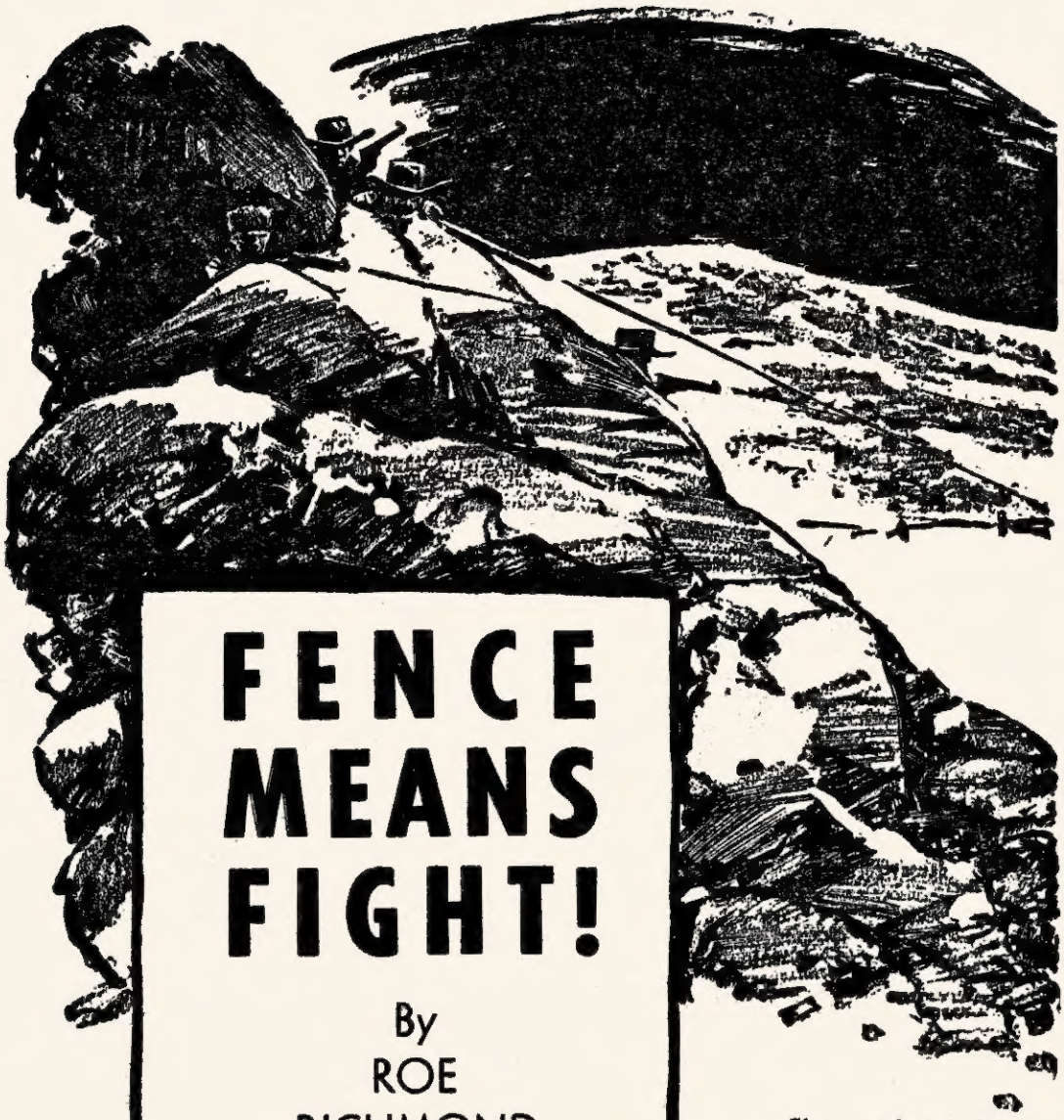


FENCE MEANS FIGHT!

By ROE RICHMOND

Shots rocketed down at them from the crags, catching Goff on the wire.

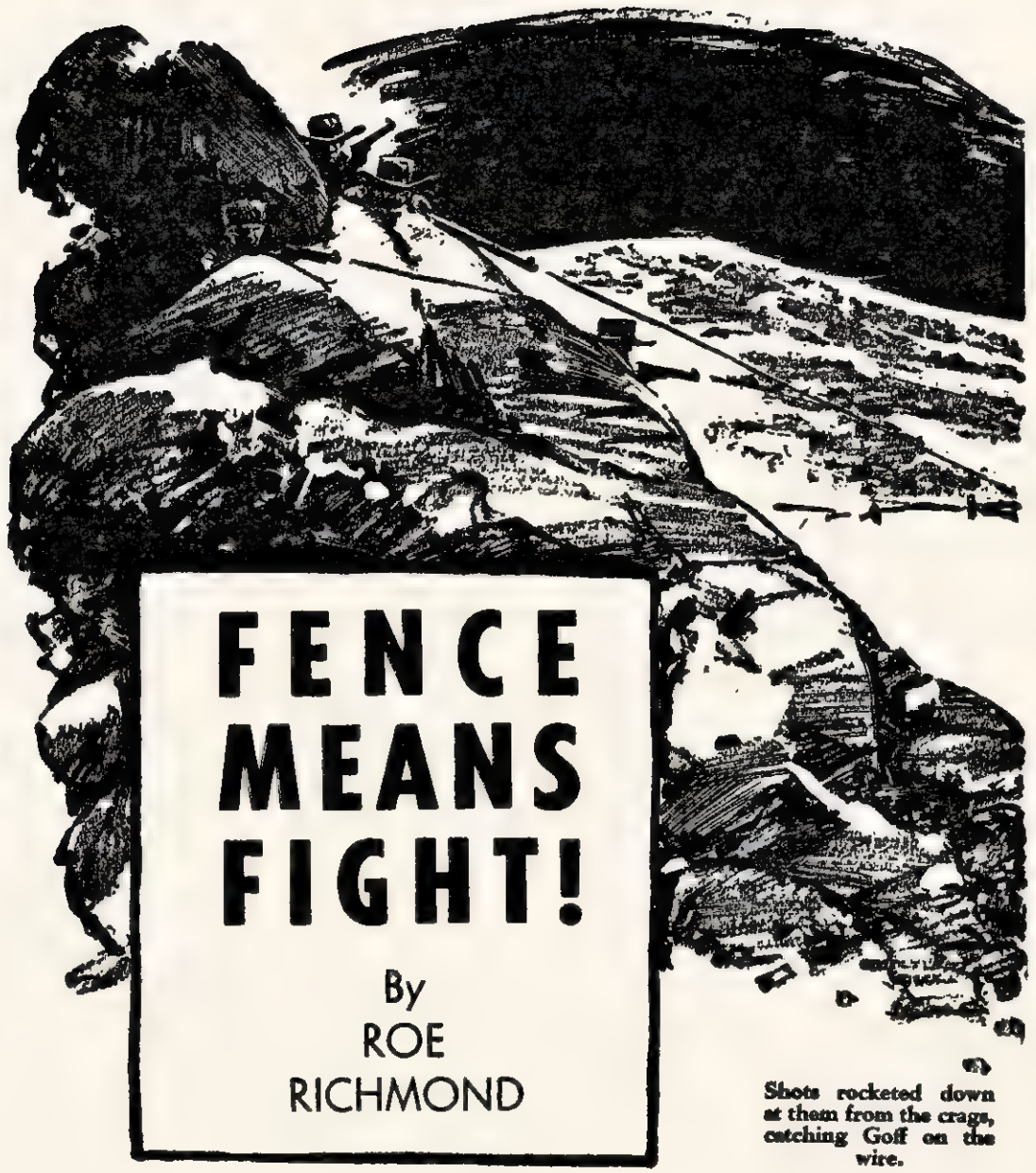
CHAPTER ONE

Winchester Winter!

THE MEN around the horseshoe table were richly dressed, well-fed and well-barbered, with an unmistakable air of prosperity and affluence. They smoked expensive cigars, toyed with tall glasses of excellent whiskey, and listened indifferently to the three men who stood by the door.

The scene was the Stockmen's private dining room in the Inter-Ocean Hotel of Cheyenne, late in the year of 1886. Winter was already white and howling at the curtained windows, but the lamplit room was stove-warmed and comfortable.

The two men at the head of the table were obviously the leaders, and it was to



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Shots rocketed down at them from the crags, catching Goff on the wire.

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them the remarks were primarily addressed. Big John Duffield, massive and rugged, ruthless and domineering even in repose, was gray-haired and iron-jawed, hawk-nosed and cruel-mouthed. His Crown-D was the largest spread on the Laramie Plains.

His companion, Lute Bromley, owned the second biggest layout, the Anvil-B, and was an enormously fat and jovial man, harmless and innocent in appearance, but no less rapacious and grasping than Duffield in reality. The three standing men, roughly dressed in range clothes, were small ranchers from Rawhide Creek in the north. Dan Stryker, the tallest of the trio, was doing most of the talking in a slow softly-intense voice.

"It's bound to be a bad winter, and another one like '83 will wipe us out," Stryker said, in conclusion of a rather lengthy speech. "Unless those fences come down, so our cattle can get to shelter."

"What makes you think it'll be a bad one?" asked Duffield.

"You can feel it comin'," Stryker said. "And the Gros Ventre Indians have already seen big white Arctic owls down this way."

"Full of firewater, the Gros Ventre Indians are apt to see most anythin'," said Lute Bromley dryly, and the seated men chuckled and snickered appreciatively.

"Real funny," Stryker drawled, his rangy rawboned figure seeming to grow taller, his lean angular face hardening, and his light gray eyes flaring coldly.

Beside him Mark Blasser spoke with deep-toned bitterness: "It'll be a lot funnier when thousands of head of beef are piled up dead against them damn-fool fences!" Broad and square, Blasser stood solidly planted, boots well apart, thumbs hooked in shell belt, his dark face sullen and ugly, his black eyes shining through narrowed lids.

"Easy, Mark," murmured the third man, Tom Morton, who was medium-sized, neat and trim, quiet, thoughtful and reserved. An intelligent and controlled man, with wavy brown hair, level brown eyes, and a mild courteous manner, that belied his inner core of hardness.

"You know why the range was fenced," Big John Duffield said with irritable impatience. "We had to do it. We were overrun with longropin' honyonkers, stealin' us blind. New brands were springin' up around every chuck-wagon and sod shanty between here and Wind River, brands built on our beef. We had to put up fences to get rid of all those ragged-pants bobtailed fly-by-night nesters and rustlers."

"Well, they're gone now," Dan Stryker said.

"Not all of them," muttered a man at the table, furtively slurring and sneering.

STRYKER stepped forward. "Get on your feet and say what you've got to say, mister!" His voice was low and deadly, his face a scarred bronze mask.

The man neither moved nor spoke. Lute Bromley raised his pudgy palms, as if beseeching Stryker to be reasonable. John Duffield glared at Stryker and said: "If you want to fight, we've got some men outside who'll accommodate you."

"Sure, I haven't forgotten your hired guns," Stryker said, as Tom Morton took his arm and tugged him back away from the table.

"We're wastin' our time here, boys," growled Mark Blasser.

"Not to mention ours," one of the seated ranchers put in.

Stryker nodded dully. Through it all he'd had the hopeless feeling of talking to a roomful of deaf mutes, or people who spoke and understood a different language. Talking to a blank wall.

"There'll be trouble, John," said Stryker. "When our steers start dyin' on your wire."

"We're runnin' the very same risks with our own herds," John Duffield declared.

"No, you aren't," Stryker said quietly. "You've got Goshen Hole to winter your stock in."

Lute Bromley shrugged ponderously. "If this climate's too rough for you boys, why don't all of you sell out and move south?"

Stryker laughed softly. "We'll freeze out first, fat man."

"You could open the Hole up to us," suggested Tom Morton.

"No room," Duffield said shortly. "Crowded, as it is."

Mark Blasser snarled low in his thick corded throat. "Let's get out of this rattlesnake nest, before I start cleanin' house!"

"So the fences stay up?" Stryker drawled.

"That's right," John Duffield said. "And don't try cuttin' them down either. If you want to stay healthy and out of jail."

"They'll come down," Stryker said gently. "When our cattle start hangin' and freezin' to death on them."

"Then you'll go down too," Duffield told him harshly.

"Maybe so," drawled Stryker. "But you better hire in some more gunhands, John."

"Tell that to Hackett and Lauck."

"And Keeshan and Skowron," added Lute Bromley.

"I'll tell 'em," Stryker said simply. "On the way out."

John Duffield stood up abruptly, a gray-haired giant, towering even above Stryker's rawboned six foot two height. "You'd better take that way now. This meetin' is over—so far as you're concerned!" He was angry and it stained his high cheekbones red, lighted his yellowish eagle-eyes.

"Thank you, John," Stryker said with quiet irony. "We're much obliged—for everythin'."

"By the Almighty!" raged Big John Duffield. "I gave you three your start in this country, and now you turn on me like this. You came in here with trail herds, owin' nothin' but your broken-down ponies and worn-out saddles, your guns and the clothes on your back. I gave you work at top pay, and let you maverick around until you had enough slicks for spreads of your own. Now you want somethin' besides!"

"What did *you* have, when you started out, John?" inquired Stryker.

Duffield gestured wildly, his face almost purple. "Get out of here!" he roared. "And if I ever hear of you even speakin' to my daughter again, I'll turn Hack and Lucky loose on you!"

Smiling his rare boyish smile, Stryker held the door for Morton and Blasser, pausing halfway through it himself. "What do I do if she speaks to me first, John?"

Swearing furiously, Big John Duffield swept up his glass and hurled it blindly, to shatter against the door as Stryker closed it behind him. Loud immoderate laughter sounded through the panels, and Duffield beat his great hands on the table. "If I was only twenty years younger!" he panted, shaking his noble gray head.

"Forget it, John," advised Lute Bromley, pouring him another drink. "We've got younger men to do our fightin' for us now."

Duffield looked at him with thinly veiled contempt. "It ain't the same though," he said heavily, ungrammatical in his anger. "It ain't like handin' it out yourself."

"What if we do have a real bad winter?" asked one of the others.

John Duffield gulped at his fresh drink. "We'll be all right in Goshen Hole. The little shoestring outfits, like Stryker's, will be out of luck, that's all."

THE THREE cowmen from the Rawhide had ceased laughing, or even smiling, before they descended the stairs into the lobby of the Inter-Ocean Hotel, which was elaborate and palatial for a frontier town. Dan Stryker was rolling a cigarette, Mark Blasser had bitten off a big chew of tobacco, and Tom Morton was loading his pipe.

As they had anticipated, Hackett and Lauck, the Crown gunmen, were waiting near the foot of the stairway. Hackett was lean, lank and wiry as whipcord, with a sharp-featured bony triangular shaped face, evil eyes and a vicious mouth. Lucky Lauck was short, squat and plump, froglike in general appearance, round-faced, pop-eyed, smiling and deadly.

"I guess you boys told 'em what's what," Hackett said with an insolent grin. "You must of scared the big augurs plenty."

"Didn't they take you into the Association?" chortled Lauck. "We figured they'd make you honorary members, at least."

Having worked for Duffield's Crown crew, the Rawhide trio knew this pair well. Stryker strode forward and split them apart, concentrating on Hackett, leaving Lauck to the other two.

"Don't crowd me tonight, Hack," he warned evenly.

"Be tough while you can, big boy," said Hackett. "I'm just waitin' on the word. When it comes you'll get whittled down to size."

"You can start anytime, killer," Stryker told him calmly.

"I work under orders, or you wouldn't still be walkin' around the way you are," Hackett said.

Across the lobby Keeshan and Skowron, Bromley's bodyguards from Anvil, were loitering under a great crystal chandelier. Stryker nodded toward them, his bronze head gold-streaked in the lamplight. "I see you've got backin', as usual."

"I don't need any backin', Stryker," said Hackett. "When the time comes to take you, I'll do it myself."

"That time's comin'," Stryker drawled easily. "Maybe sooner than you think."

The Anvil men watched this scene, their eyes slitted against the blue smoke of their cigars. Bull Keeshan was big, burly and swaggering, with a broken-nosed brutal face, reddish hair and beard stubble, hot angry-looking eyes and a contemptuous mouth. As tall as Stryker and much heavier, Keeshan enjoyed fighting and killing. His partner, Symes Skowron, was long, sinewy and snakelike, with a small reptilian head and the face of a vulture, cold colorless eyes glinting with a kind of madness.

These four are the backbone of Anvil and Crown, Stryker thought. There aren't too many real gun-fighters left in Wyoming. If we can down these four, when the crisis comes, we'll have Duffield and Bromley pretty well whipped.

Turning away, trailed by the stocky Blasser and the slim Morton, Stryker went to the cloakroom for their hats and sheepskin jackets. He knew Carol Duffield was waiting for him in the Platte House, and he intended to see her, regardless of Big John's threat. If it precipitated a fight, very well, it might as well come now as later.

Stryker thought with cold rage of the other small ranchers in the region, men who were faced with disaster but dared not stand up to the big cattlemen. By sticking together, they could tear down the fences and control the range, but there were too many down-trodden, defeated, gutless men among them, afraid to fight for their rights.

Only Stryker, Morton and Blasser had the courage to appear before the Stockmen's Association. It hadn't accomplished much, except to clarify their position,

but Stryker felt better now that the cards were on the table.

THEY went out past Hackett and Lauck, and on toward the front door, wanting a drink but preferring to have it in more congenial surroundings. The Crown gunhands watched them in scornful silence, but Bull Keeshan shouldered out toward them and spoke raspingly:

"It ain't goin' to be healthy to meddle with fenches from here on, Stryker. I hope the big moguls gave you sufficient warnin'."

Dan Stryker eyed him steadily. "They did. And I'll tell you what I told them, Keeshan. When our beef starts dyin' on those fences, the wire'll come down."

"That's your death warrant, Stryker."

"Mine, maybe," Stryker drawled. "And a lot of others, too."

Outside in the night, the wind was blowing and the early snow swirling under the wooden awnings, against the high false-fronted buildings, blurring the lights of Cheyenne. There was little traffic, and only a few scattered horses at the tie-rails. The three men ducked into the gusty air, and Tom Morton asked:

"What are we going to do, Dan?"

"I don't know—yet."

"I reckon you'll be seein' Carol," said Mark Blasser gruffly. "Tom and I'll kinda cover your back, Dan."

In the barroom of the Platte House they had three quick quiet rounds of whiskey, and then Stryker left them to enter the lobby. Carol Duffield was sitting in a far dim corner, and even there the faint straying lamplight touched her coppery head with gleams of red-gold.

Walking toward her, Stryker felt as always the rising warming glow of excitement and pleasure. She looked up, that familiar and well-loved smile brightening her fine clear face, crinkling the slightly tilted green eyes at the corners, dimpling the soft contours of her cheeks, showing the white perfect teeth between the full red lips.

"How did it go, Dan?" she asked anxiously.

"It didn't," he said, grinning ruefully. "It didn't go at all, Carol."

"I was afraid of that," Carol Duffield admitted, her face sobering. "There's no mercy in those men. Nothing but a lust for more money, more cattle, more power."

"Your dad warned me not to speak to you any more, Cary."

The girl laughed defiantly. "That's one thing he can't dictate, Dan. He can disown me, I suppose, but he can't keep me away from you."

Stryker was silent, grateful, marvelling as usual at her loveliness and the fact that Carol Duffield, who could have married any of the most eligible and successful young men in the Territory, had fallen in love with him, a $50-a-month rider for her father's Crown-D. And still preferred him, now that he was a small struggling rancher on the brink of bankruptcy.

"I'm going to Laramie for the Holidays," Carol said. "We can be together there, without any interference."

"I'm liable to be too busy to celebrate, unless this weather breaks," Stryker said gloomily.

"Then I'll come up on the Rawhide with you, Dan," the girl announced promptly.

Stryker's smile was grave, somber. "That'd really open the ball, Cary. That would touch off the fireworks for fair."

Carol Duffield stood up and moved close to him, since they were temporarily alone in the shadowy room. She was rather tall for a girl, lithe and willowy but fully curved, with a clean aristocracy of figure as well as features. Her arms went around his lean hard muscled wait, her fragrance filled his head, and her nearness set his blood on fire.

Her copper-red head went back and her face lifted eagerly, as Stryker's long powerful arms drew her tight against him. Their lips met, crushed and clinging with sweet rapture, and a shimmering wonder lived in the drab dimness, blending them into one.

"Why don't you marry me, and be done with it?" she whispered breathlessly, her eyes wide and awed on the lean, scarred, strong-boned bronze of his face.

"You wouldn't want a shootin' war on our honeymoon," Stryker protested huskily.

"Why not?" she demanded, laughing recklessly. "If you can shoot as straight and fast as I think you can, Dan."

"The odds aren't too good, Cary," he reminded her gently.

Her face was suddenly shocked, her green eyes staring over his wide shoulder at the entrance, her hands pushing frantically against his broad chest.

"Here they come, Dan! Hackett and Lauck!"

CHAPTER TWO

On to the Goshen Death-Trap!

STRYKER released her at once, slipping out of his heavy jacket and flinging it across a chair, loosening his six guns in the low tied-down sheath of his right thigh, wheeling to face the doorway. Hackett and Lauck came in with a flurry of snow and cold air, slamming the door after them, shaking off snowflakes and pushing back their open sheepskins, to clear the handles of their guns.

Calmly and purposefully, cold and deliberate, they advanced on the couple in the corner, Hacket tall and loose-limbed and wolf-jawed, Lauck deceptively plump, soft-looking and smiling.

"You'd better leave, Miss Carol," said Hackett, gesturing left-handed, venomous eyes on Stryker's rangy form.

"I'm staying right here," Carol Duffield said. "And you'd better not start anything, Hack."

"Stryker, you're plumb foolish," Hackett said disgustedly. "After Big John told you and everythin'. What's the matter with you, man?"

"He must be sick of livin', Hack," suggested Lauck in his half-lisping, liquid voice.

Stryker, glancing toward the corridor leading to the barroom, saw four men standing there, Blasser and Morton facing Keeshan and Skowron, a perfect stalemate. He would have to handle these two alone, and he was ready to try it—if Carol hadn't been there.

But perhaps her presence would prevent Hack and Lucky from using their guns. In a barehanded rough-and-tumble brawl, Stryker estimated that his chances should be good enough. Of the four gunsharps, only Bull Keeshan was really formidable without a Colt.

Spaced out about ten feet apart, Hackett and Lauck faced Dan Stryker, and Hack said sneeringly:

"I never thought you'd hide behind a woman's skirts, big boy."

"Why don't you take a walk, Cary?" said Stryker. "This might as well come now as any other time."

"I'm staying, Dan. And I'm evening the odds." Carol Duffield's shapely right hand came out with a .36 Colt in it, cocked and leveled, firm and steady on her father's hired gunmen. "You boys know I can use this thing, and I will. The first man that reaches gets it, and I'll shoot to kill!"

Hackett and Lauck exchanged looks of surprise and perplexity. This affair had gotten out of hand. They knew now they should have waited until Stryker left the girl. They had been over-anxious, having waited so long for an opportunity to get at Stryker. Now they were helpless, handcuffed by their own impulsiveness.

Stryker sauntered toward them. "Maybe you'd like to try it without guns?"

"Kid stuff!" snorted Hackett. "We'll wait and get you right. You won't always have a girl guardin' you."

"Maybe you need a little lesson," Stryker drawled, lashing out suddenly, hooking his left savagely into Hackett's long bony face.

Hackett's head rocked as he lurched sidewise, sprawling across a large armchair. Lauck came leaping in with surprising speed for one of his squat portly build, but Stryker was already shifting his feet and swinging his right fist. It landed squarely in that full fleshy face with a sodden smash, and blood spouted freely as Lauck's big head snapped far back.

Stryker hit him with a left on the way down. Lauck's head and shoulders struck the hardwood floor with jarring crashing force, his fat body bouncing and quivering, settling into a senseless heap.

HACKETT had recovered and was on top of Stryker by that time, hammering wildly away at the blond head and angular face, trying to beat Stryker into the boards. But Stryker hurled him off with an explosive burst, and when Hackett came charging back Stryker's left ripped and raked him, hooking and slashing him blind and off-balance.

As Hackett tottered backward, Stryker unleashed his right hand. It sounded like an ax on the butchering block, lifting Hack bodily, dropping him sideways into the leather chair.

Stryker's momentum carried him forward, too close, and with all his ebbing strength and fury Hackett thrashed out with his long legs, driving the bootheels deep into Stryker's abdomen. Gasping and doubled in the middle, Stryker fought for breath on sagging knees, the agony grinding through his body, turning him sick and faint.

Hackett came up out of that chair like a maniac now, slugging at Stryker's bowed head and unprotected face, sledging home wicked blows that mashed Stryker's mouth and nose, bruised his eyes and laid open the prominent cheekbones. Straightening up and staggering back, stunned by the swift shocking concussions, Stryker tripped over Lauck's thick stumpy legs, and the floor rushed up to slam his shoulder blades and drive the breath from his laboring lungs.

Hackett, snarling and blowing blood like a wounded animal, jumped in to kick the life out the fallen enemy. Somehow Stryker wrapped his arms about those stamping legs and rolled on the planks, heaving and spilling Hackett, scrambling free on hands and knees.

They came up almost simultaneously, their breath sobbing in and out with a ragged agonizing sound, blood streaming from their battered faces, soaking their clothes. Hackett, hampered by his jacket, was slower, and Stryker got in the first punch, pouring his whole rangy frame into it. Hackett reeled clear across the lobby, rebounding from the wall, falling flat on his face and lying there, limp and motionless except for his racked breathing.

Stryker wanted to go over and hit him again, but it was altogether too far, not worth the effort. Turning groggily, he stumbled back toward the corner where Carol Duffield stood with the gun still in her hand.

"Sorry—you had to—see it," panted Stryker.

"I didn't mind, Dan," she said, easing him down into an armchair. "They didn't have a chance, until Hackett used his boots. Rest now, Danny, while I get some water and towels."

KEESHAN and Skowron moved into the room to attend to Lauck and Hackett, with Blasser and Morton con-

tinuing to watch them closely. The Bull tramped across the floor and stood glaring down at Stryker.

"I wish I'd been in that ruckus," Keeshan growled. "Them two can't fight without guns."

"Your turn'll come," Stryker said slowly, his breath still coming in tortured gasps.

"It'll come all right," grated Bull Keeshan. "You ain't goin' to live long enough to feel happy about winnin' this half-witted fracas."

"Shut up and beat it, Bull," Mark Blasser said through his teeth.

Keeshan looked at him and Morton. "You two'll be gettin' it at the same time."

"We won't go alone," Tom Morton said mildly.

"Come on, Bull," called Symes Skowron. "We got to patch up these two wrecks here. It's a good thing that gal was around, or there'd be four corpses on this floor."

Carol Duffield returned with a basin of water and some towels. Blasser and Morton stood watchfully by while she went to work tenderly and efficiently on Stryker's gashed and swollen face.

After a time Stryker was restored to some semblance of normalcy, revived and refreshed enough to enjoy the bottle Tom Morton had thoughtfully procured from the bar. They had the lobby to themselves, since the Crown and Anvil men and the spectators had disappeared, and Stryker was doing some serious thinking over his drink and the cigarette Blasser had made for him.

"They haven't moved many herds into Goshen Hole yet, have they, Carol?" he inquired finally.

"No," she replied. "They're planning the big drive after New Years."

"They say to fight fire with fire," mused Stryker. "Perhaps we can fight fences with fences."

Blasser and Morton nodded grimly, knowing at once what he was considering. There were only two main passes into the Hole, the North and the South, through which large herds could be driven. They had already chipped in to buy and store enough wire to close those comparatively narrow trails, as a last-ditch resort against the big owners.

Stryker had hoped it would never be necessary to employ such tactics, but it began to look as if it might be their only hope of salvation. And it would certainly convince Duffield and Bromley what death-traps fences can become in a winter storm.

"It's goin' to be war, Cary," said Dan Stryker. "We'd better not see each other again until it's over."

Carol Duffield shook her red-gold head and smiled at his welted misshapen face. "I'm in it, Dan—on your side. I don't see how you're going to get rid of me either."

"Well, here's to Christmas in Laramie," said Tom Morton, lifting his glass.

"And New Years in Goshen Hole," Mark Blasser added solemnly.

THE REAL winter cold came to the Rawhide before Christmas, earlier than even the most pessimistic had expected, settling in with a bitter iron-hard clamp on the countryside. Dan Stryker knew they had waited too long. There was meager consolation in the fact that the big ranchers to the south would be unprepared also.

The Rawhide valley, like the rest of the Laramie Plains, was cross-hatched and cluttered with wire boundary lines now. It had been Big John Duffield's idea to break up the open range, and put an end to the free-for-all rustling of upstart nester outfits. Every Crown and Anvil employee had been induced to file a homestead claim of 1,200 acres, and the other big brands followed suit.

By filing along the streams and fencing the land, the water was shut off to the hated honyonkers, who had built up their herds with long ropes, marking knives and running irons, at the expense of the large layouts.

It was illegal, of course, for the riders never intended to homestead the claims, even if the owners had permitted it. It was simply a means of acquiring more graze and water rights, and driving out the small floating outfits of undesirables. But the Law wasn't powerful enough to challenge and oppose men like Duffield and Bromley.

Stryker, Blasser and Morton, however, filing with the other cowhands, had taken three adjacent claims on Rawhide Creek, well north of the parent spreads. During their employment at Crown, those three had accumulated fair-sized herds of their own, through various methods. Picking up strays and slicks, buying cheap from rustling nesters who were moving out, and occasionally altering brands and fleshmarks. It was common and accepted practice, easy to do with countless herds roaming at large in those lush booming times.

Having filed, Stryker and his two comrades set about trying to prevail on Duffield to let them actually settle and work their claims, arguing that it would lend authenticity to the entire project. Big John, anxious to separate Stryker from his daughter Carol at any cost, finally agreed to the proposition. The three riders left Crown, built homestead shacks, barns and corrals on the Rawhide, hired a couple of hands apiece, and gathered their half-wild cattle from the brush and hills.

For two years they had worked like dogs and now, just when it looked as if another year would see them securely established, in the clear and on the way up, a combination of winter weather and wire fences threatened to destroy all they had created so slowly and laboriously, sweated and strained, suffered and bled for.

A couple of mornings before Christmas, Dan Stryker watched the weather build up in the northern sky, tier on tier of blackening clouds towering above the prairie. The air was hushed, breathless and eerily still, charged with an electric tension and expectancy, that made the livestock as nervous and fretful as the humans.

There was a strong feeling of impending disaster, something dreadful and overwhelming about to break loose on the December earth. Even in the cold, Stryker was sweating under that intense pressure.

Toward noon it began to snow softly, the first flakes large and lazy, falling straight and slow from the ominous overcast, and Dan Stryker knew for certain the blizzard was coming. After a conference with Morton and Blasser, they decided to start cutting fences so the cattle could drift south before the storm.

"With luck we'll run 'em all the way into Goshen Hole," said Stryker. "And bottle up the South Pass before Crown, Anvil, and the rest of the big herds hit it. Our only chance to save our stock."

The hired hands were appalled by the prospects of such a winter drive and a blighted Holiday season, and Stryker could not blame them in the least. But they pledged themselves to stick as far as the junction with the Platte River and Fort Laramie—providing they survived that distance.

Nine men against all the elements, the vested beef interests, the law and order of the Territory, thought Dan Stryker. Nine men against the world.

THEY dressed as warmly as possible from long flannel underwear to buffalo-hide and sheepskin coats, with fur hunting caps tied under their chins and bandannas drawn across their noses.

They wore extra woolen socks in their loosest-fitting boots, and stuffed saddlebags with grain and corn for the horses, biscuits and jerked beef for themselves. Spare canteens of water and whiskey, and bandoleers of ammunition were tied to the saddles. Each man was armed with wire-cutters and files, as well as Colt revolvers and Winchester carbines.

The blizzard struck with smoking fury before they got started, blasting out of the north, bringing bottomless darkness and sleet-like snow that slashed, stung and cut through the heaviest clothing. Already cattle were piled up and dying on the wire to the north, as the men rode out into the blinding gale and deployed across the shallow valley of the Rawhide, to breach the fences that ran east-and-west. The steers would surge due south under that lashing north wind. The men would have to work like mad to keep the way open, and always at their ice-glazed backs was the danger of stampedes.

The wind all but ripped a man from his saddle, tearing the breath from his throat and lungs, and the cold was a searing penetrating and terrible thing. It was impossible to see more than a few feet in that boiling white inferno, and all you could do was keep a loose rein and give the horse his head.

They cut the first two barriers ahead of the cattle, but before they reached the third, steers were streaming and bawling past them on all sides, ghostly forms plunging and snorting in terror. They wouldn't be turned, and the only thing to do was drift along with them.

In places the drifts were so deep the riders' boots and stirrups dragged in the snow. The cold was a horror that cloaked them from head to heels, chilling and cramping, biting through clothes and flesh into the very bone.

At the third fence, cattle were bunched and entangled in every coulee and swale, bucking, fighting and trampling one another, scrabbling and stomping over the fallen, bawling pitifully beneath the awful sustained shriek of the wind, crippled and freezing and dying with their legs caught and broken in the wire.

It wasn't safe to cut through in the low places where the animals were gathered, for the ensuing stampede would immediately overrun and obliterate horse and rider. Hoping that the others would foresee this but unable to communicate with them, Stryker attacked the fence with his clippers at the slightly higher points between the beef-packed brawling washes.

He emptied his sixgun a couple of times to put some of the tortured trapped creatures out of their misery, while fury and hatred for Duffield, Bromley and the rest of the rich owners, swelled in Stryker until it approxmiated the violence of the blizzard.

THE remainder of that storm-torn afternoon was a hideous nightmare, with men and horses toiling on, suffering untold agonies and fighting the endless battle against insurmountable odds. Darkness came early, a mere thickening of the dim shrouded daylight, and the wind died down a bit, so Stryker was able to find the line shack they had agreed to rendezvous in at dusk.

Tom Morton was already there with his two riders, and had a fire roaring in the stove, while Fulbright and McMinn were rubbing down and graining the horses in the adjoining shed. Stryker left his mount and stumbled into the large main cabin on numb aching legs, encrusted with snow and ice, eyebrows frosted white, weary enough to lie down and die.

The relief of the warmth and the presence of the others was so great that Stryker was on the verge of crying like a small boy, who had found his way home after being hopelessly lost.

He was still thawing out and worrying

about the others when Selby staggered in out of the storm, followed a few moments later by his employer, Mark Blasser. They both expressed fear concerning Goff, the other Blasser man. And Stryker was beginning to wonder if he had sent his two hands, old Nealley and young Rhoads, to their death.

At intervals, one or another of the men stepped outside and fired several shots into the air, to guide the three stray riders to the shanty—if they were still alive. Young Rhoads arrived at last, his cheeks yellowish-white with frostbite, his eyes haunted.

"Old Neal's gone," he reported with bitterness. "Horse bogged down, and the steers stampeded over 'em. Tried to get in to him, but I didn't have a chance—until the cattle were gone." Rhoads choked and swallowed hard. "Wasn't much left of Nealley and the horse."

Stryker handed him a tin cupful of whiskey, and the boy drained it like water.

They built an outside fire and shot off some more shells to indicate their position, but Goff didn't come in. Once they were rested and fed, Stryker and Blasser rode back to search for him in the night, but found no trace of the man or his mount. Goff was undoubtedly buried under one of those grotesque mounds of dead beef. Or lost somewhere and frozen to death.

"Two men in half a day," snarled Mark Blasser. "I don't know as it's worth it, Dan."

"It's worth it to me—and maybe you and Tom," said Stryker. "But not to the others. Not to any thirty-a-month man, Mark. We'll send them into Laramie tomorrow."

"And you're goin' through, Dan?"

"All the way to Goshen Hole," Stryker said with simple conviction.

"Sure, me too," muttered Mark Blas-

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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ser. "I got nobody to celebrate Christmas with. And nothin' to celebrate, unless we save some of our beef."

CHAPTER THREE

The Living Dead

IN THE morning it was wickedly cold as ever, the prairie drifted yards deep in places, scoured bare in others, but the blizzard had blown itself out toward the south. With visibility better and no gale-whipped sleet to buffet them, the men could and did work much faster.

The hired hands had been offered leave to depart for Laramie, but Selby chose to backtrack and hunt for Goff, or his body, and the others said they would cut wire to the Platte, since it was practically on their way to the town.

There were windrows of dead cattle, scattered stark and stiff along each wire-fenced boundary. There were others, alive but in horrible agony, bleeding from hocks and chins and nostrils, some with frozen tails and hoofs actually broken off, standing on bloody stumps and bleating mournfully. These agonized and hopelessly crippled brutes were killed as fast as the riders could pump bullets into them.

But a great many more had somehow weathered and survived the cruel night, finding some shelter and nourishment in the narrow rock-rimmed canyons and broken terrain on either side of the Rawhide. These came trailing out as the men labored southward, and the herd grew constantly as it drifted toward the Platte.

The cattle could be driven today, and Stryker devised a system to speed up progress. He and young Rhoads worked ahead, clearing the way with their wire-cutters, while Blasser and Morton with Fulbright and McMinn pushed the steers along through the openings. As the forenoon wore on, they were making pretty fair trail-herd time, considering the cold and the treacherous snow-and-ice footing, and the fences that Stryker slashed at as if they were flesh-and-blood foes.

Early in the afternoon they crossed the Platte River on a solid bed of ice, and halted to warm up and eat lunch in a line shack on the southern shore. The wind was rising again, howling out of the north and carrying fine hard particles of snow.

The cattle moved on before it, but the Rawhide men were no longer worried about their surviving stock. There were no more fences between here and the North Pass to Goshen Hole. The worst was over, Stryker thought, and the way was clear.

The next fight would be against men and guns.

Fulbright and McMinn were branching off westward here, to spend Christmas Eve with their families in Laramie, but young Rhoads had decided to stay on the trail.

"If I go into town I'll just get drunk and in trouble prob'ly," he remarked philosophically. "I'm better off ridin' this one out, I reckon."

Fulbright and McMinn were rather reluctant and sheepish about leaving the party, but everyone assured them they were doing the right thing, they belonged with their own folks on Christmas. Leaving their whiskey canteens and shaking hands all around, the two married men mounted up and rode off in the direction of Laramie. Selby had not overtaken the drive, after his search for Goff, and it was assumed that he had cut across country toward town.

WITH only four men left, it seemed like a very small group, but they were in good spirits as they swung on after the herd, riding toward the mouth of Horse Creek and the wide-open trail to Goshen Hole. There might be Crown and Anvil guards at the entrance, but they were go-

ing through regardless. They had done a great job of work in the last two days, and they were ready to do another against whatever kind of odds came up.

An hour or so later, bringing up the drag of the wind-driven herd, Dan Stryker spotted a lone rider coming up fast from behind. Pointing him out to the others, squinting into the wind and snow, Stryker lifted his Winchester out of its scabbard, levered a shell into the chamber, and sat his saddle, calm and waiting. The others got out their carbines and ranged along side of him.

The sound of wind-torn shots floated to them, as pursuing horsemen bunched into view at the far corner of a rock-ribbed snow-sculptured bench. The bullets raked up streamers of powdery white around the fleeing rider, and then he seemed to jerk and sag in the saddle. Stryker recognized him at that moment.

"It's Fulbright," he said. "They must've got Mac." Stryker surveyed the immediate terrain, on which jumbled ice-sheathed boulders offered adequate cover. "Let's fort up here, boys, two on each flank."

He sidled his big slate-gray gelding to the left, and young Rhoads slanted after him. Blasser and Morton withdrew and dismounted on the right side of the broad trail. Stryker stepped down, ground-tied the gray, and started chipping ice out of a V-shaped niche in the rockpile with the steelshod butt of his carbine.

There looked to be about a half-dozen enemy riders in the pursuit, and Fulbright seemed to be hard hit, barely managing to stay in the leather. Farther back, McMinn was no doubt lying dead in the snow. Anger blazed up in Stryker, as he thought of their wives and kids waiting in Laramie on Christmas Eve.

Fulbright had seen them before him, and he kneed his blown mount in behind the barrier of stone on Stryker's side, the horse standing lathered and frost-rimed, with Fulbright hanging in agony over the ice-flecked mane. Stryker lifted him carefully from the saddle, and laid him on the blanket Rhoads had spread over the snowy ground.

"Jumped us," Fulbright sobbed painfully. "Seven of 'em—Anvil and Crown. Got Mac—shot to pieces—the first volley. I got—one of 'em. Had to run. Don't know—how I got out—Dan."

Stryker raised and turned him gently, examined the wound, and said nothing. The slug had gone through shoulder, lung and chest. Fulbright was dying, and Stryker could do nothing for him.

"I know—I'm done," panted Fulbright. A shudder shook him, but he tried to smile, blood trickling from his mouth. "Maybe warmer—where I'm goin', Dan." He groped weakly for his pocket. "Money here. See that—my folks—get it."

"We'll take care of your family—and Mac's," said Stryker. "We'll see that they get along, Ful. Rest easy now, boy."

STRYKER went back to his cleft in the boulders, blinking his smarting eyes. The enemy hadn't seen them in the snow-screened murk, and the rocks were high enough to hide horses as well as men. Crown and Anvil were coming right in, bent on hunting Fulbright down and finishing him off. Then they'd go on to rout that herd, stampede it away from the Goshen track.

Stryker signalled to Morton and Blasser to hold their fire. He couldn't recognize any of the bundled-up riders as yet, but he hated every one of them.

Come on, come on, he thought, fiercely and eagerly. Ride right into it, you hungry murdering buzzards! It'll take all six of you to even up for McMinn and Fulbright. And a lot more of you to make up for Goff and old Nealley and all that beef.

Sensing danger, the little cavalcade reined up and fanned out, but they were

well within rifle range. Stryker swung his right hand sharply, and took aim through that crevice. The shots rang out almost simultaneously. A horse reared screaming and floundered down, flinging his rider clear.

Another man keeled slowly from the saddle, one foot catching in the stirrup as his mount bolted, dragging him head-down over the snow-swept stone-studded surface. And the Rawhide riflemen went on levering and triggering, lashing the horsemen with a terrible withering cross-fire.

Crown and Anvil were shooting back now, wildly from their pitching ponies, the shots spouting small geysers of snow and dirt, or screeching off the rock faces. The marksman who had been thrown fired steadily from a kneeling posture, until Stryker's bullet caught him full in the chest and smashed him over backwards to remain spread-agled on the reddening white ground.

Another rider buckled and toppled headfirst into a snowdrift, his horse falling beside him, thrashing briefly into stillness. With three down, dead or dying, the other three whirled into panicky flight. But one horse and rider did not get far, cartwheeling end over end in a weltering shower of snow, and sprawling motionless once their momentum ceased. The remaining pair raced on, and were soon safely out of range.

"Let 'em go, kid, let 'em go," Stryker said, as young Rhoads vaulted into his saddle. "It's too bad, they'll cause us trouble, but we can't waste time chasin' 'em." Rhoads cursed and stepped down again.

Reloading his Winchester, Stryker glanced at Fulbright, silent and rigid on the blood-stained blanket, and knelt quickly by his side. Fulbright was dead, and Stryker took up the swearing where Rhoads left off.

"If there's any money on those corpses out there," Stryker said, teeth on edge, "we'll take it—for those kids of Fulbright's and Mac's."

A RAPID burst of gunfire rolled down from the north, and looking up Stryker saw that the two enemy survivors were engaged in another battle, bushwhacked, beaten down and dying, before they realized what had struck them. The hammering rifle reports echoed, faded, and two more men lay huddled on the white valley floor, with one of their horses kicking in the death throes nearby.

All six of them, a clean sweep, Stryker thought with savage exultance. Not one of them left to report to Duffield and Bromley now.

And then he saw the two sharpshooters, who had brought this bloody game to such an abrupt ending, one mounted, roping the riderless and unhurt horse for the other, who was afoot.

"By all that's holy!" breathed Stryker. "It's Selby—*and Goff!*"

He was correct, even at that distance. It was Selby and with him, Goff, like a man returned from the dead. They rode in shortly and explained the miracle. Late yesterday afternoon, Goff had lost his horse in a sudden stampede of cattle, barely escaping with his own life by catching a branch and swinging aloft into a tree.

Alone and helpless on foot, faced with freezing to death before he could reach shelter, Goff had spent a night of horror burrowed deep into a mass of dead steers, kept alive by the warmth of their bodies. He was still a ghastly sight, crusted all over with frozen blood, but Goff was uninjured and very much alive.

"The luckiest damn Dutchman that ever drew breath!" Goff said, grinning all over his square grimy beard-stubbled face. "But I'm sure goin' to hate cow critters from now on, and I never want to eat any more beef."

"How come?" demanded Selby. "The

poor beasts saved your worthless life, Dutch."

"Maybe that's it," Goff said. "I'd feel like a cannibal, if I ever ate beef again."

They made a crypt for Fulbright in the boulders, secure against wolves and coyotes and vultures, and went on after the herd. They had lost three good men, but they had exacted some measure of payment in six enemy lives, and there were still six of them to hold Goshen Hole against the armed hordes of Crown-D and Anvil-B, the gun-fighters of Duffield and Bromley.

The bulk of their cattle was ahead of them, nearing the sheltered rimrock confines of Goshen Hole, watered by Horse Creek. Wire and fence posts were cached away by the South Pass, toward which the vast herds of the wealthy ranchers would soon be moving, if not already.

It was going to be a strange Christmas Eve, a most unusual Christmas, but they were six men welded closer than blood brothers, by battle and the hardest kind of work, by striving and suffering and death.

Dan Stryker couldn't think of any men he'd rather be with, any time or anywhere in the world. And only one woman —Carol Duffield.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blockade!

DUSK was saffron-streaked lavender deepening to purple and blue-black, weird over the broken white landscape, hushed now that the wind and snow had lulled. As they neared their objective, Dan Stryker and Mark Blasser were scouting ahead of the herd, while Tom Morton strung out his lead steers and kept the point moving. Goff and Selby rode swing on the flanks, and young Rhoads was chanting away as he prodded the lame chilled drag along:

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"Hi yi, git along cow critters, git along! Goshen Hole's your Bethlehem and your manger. You'll sleep warm tonight, steers. There's always some kinda graze in Goshen, always water in Horse Creek. Never winter in the Hole, so roll along, you dogies. Ramble on, you steers!"

The cold pressed down like a brutal iron weight on the world, torturing men and beasts alike. There was a stout log cabin at the mouth of North Pass, and no signs of life or habitation about it. No smoke from the stovepipe, no lights, no fresh tracks. The gate to Goshen was open, and the weary decimated herds from the Rawhide were going to plod through unchallenged, into the sanctuary of the sunken hill-girded bowl.

Stryker and Blasser rode past the log house, slitted eyes peering under frosty eyelashes and brows, Colts cocked and ready in gloved hands. The Pass was open and untenanted, the way was clear. they turned back and pulled up before the cabin. Stryker forced a shout from his aching lungs and throat:

"Bring 'em up, Tom! Let 'em roll!"

Morton led the point by, and Stryker yelled: "Take 'em in a ways, Tom. Then drop back here." Selby and Goff worked the swing into the passage, and went along with the herd. Young Rhoads grinned and saluted gayly as he pushed the drag past. And the dusky air was suddenly screaming with lead slugs, as shots ripped and torched from the windows in the log walls.

What a damn fool I was, for not making sure, Stryker thought bitterly.

His gray gelding bucked violently, and Stryker heard the impact of the bullet in solid horseflesh. Rearing and whirling, screaming with a high human note of anguish, the gelding fell over backward. Stryker kicked out of the stirrups and hurled himself clear, rolling in soft trampled snow beside the trail, clawing his sixgun out of the cold-stiffened leather holster, trying to regain his balance.

Fire was still jetting from the cabin, the shots snarling through brush and fir boughs, furrowing up fountains of snow. The gray horse landed threshing beside Stryker, and subsided into stillness. Stryker crawled close to that great body for protection.

RHOADS, hit in the back with the first burst of shooting, wheeled his mount in a wild reckless charge at the log house, his Colt flaring and shattering window-glass. Another slug caught him, lifting the boy from the saddle, dropping him loosely asprawl, inert and lifeless looking in the snowy trail.

Mark Blasser, still in the leather and slamming shots at the cabin, circled it at a wide gallop. Stryker heard Mark's gun blasting from behind the structure, with another weapon answering from inside.

Only two of them, estimated Stryker. They've got more nerve than sense, to jump six of us. But that building is a regular damned fort.

From the shelter of his dead horse, Stryker watched and waited, holding his fire, wanting them to think he was finished.

Apparently they did think so. With the guns still racketing at the rear, the front door opened and a long thin figure slipped outside, starting around after Blasser. It was Symes Skowron of Anvil, swift and sinuous as a snake, his small ugly head thrusting forward as he slithered toward the far corner. Stryker rose into a balanced crouch, calling:

"This way, Symes."

Skowron spun and fired blindly. Stryker leveled off and squeezed the trigger, the big .44 kicking up in his hand, the flame roaring and leaping along the front of the logs. Skowron jerked back from the shocking blow of the bullet, grunting and coughing, leaning lank and helpless on the wall, beaked face against the wood.

Stryker lined his gun and let go again. Symes Skowron writhed like a broken-backed reptile, heaved backward off the logs, twisting and stretching full length in the snow.

Striding over the dead horse, Dan Stryker drove straight at the half-open door, bursting through it at full speed, and lunging across the floor toward the big burly gunman at the back window. Bull Keeshan was hit just as he turned to meet Stryker, one of Blasser's bullets breaking his right shoulder, his gun-hand hanging limp and useless as he lurched about.

But Keeshan was always a fighter, and his huge left hand went to the gun sheathed on his left leg. Stryker picked up the table in midroom and smashed it against the giant, spoiling his draw, battering him back on the wall, pinning him momentarily there.

Leaping instantly after him, Stryker slashed his gun-barrel down across that large reddish head. Keeshan bowed under the terrific stroke, his knees jacking. But wounded and stunned as he was, Bull Keeshan went on tugging at his left-hand gun, massive shoulders braced against the logs, eyes inflamed and murderous.

Setting his feet, Stryker whipped his left fist into that brute-face, bashing the broken nose and contemptuous mouth, driving Keeshan's skull into the log-wall. The Bull stumbled forward, swaying and groaning, his immense vitality holding him up somehow.

Stryker hooked another left solidly home. Keeshan reeled back in a stilted spraddle-legged stagger, his shoulders crashing through the window-pane, his heavy hips catching on the sill.

He was rocking there, blood pouring down his face and drenching his riddled right shoulder, left hand dragging at the gun-butt, when Mark Blasser fired a final shot from the outer darkness. Bull Keeshan plunged forward from the window, fell headlong, and squirmed over onto his broad back. Still fighting and defiant, full of hatred and venom, Keeshan sneered, a grotesque bloody grimace, and wheezed out his last words:

"Thanks—for bringin' us—your cattle. Lute and Big John—sure will appreciate —that."

THEN he was dead, and outside in the snow young Rhoads and Skowron were dead, and it seemed to Dan Stryker that the whole winter world stank of blood and gunpowder and death. And it wasn't over yet.

Mark Blasser came in the front door and stood looking from Keeshan's bulk to Stryker's gaunt weathered face. "Why didn't you shoot him, Dan?"

"I don't know, Mark," said Stryker honestly.

Blasser shrugged his wide shoulders and hauled Keeshan's body outside, depositing it beside Skowron's. The others came galloping back up the trail, after leaving the herd, anxious and worried, stricken hard by the loss of Rhoads but thankful to find Stryker and Blasser alive and well.

They buried Rhoads in a shallow temporary grave, and removed the other two bodies some distance away. They built a fire, cared for the horses, cleaned and restored the cabin to order, and stuffed the broken windows with towsacking.

The Anvil men had left plenty of provisions—beef, potatoes, bread, butter, coffee, and canned goods, as well as whiskey. They had a few drinks, and quiet efficient Tom Morton set about cooking a real big supper, with the assistance of Selby.

They were all ravenously hungry, of course, and even Dutch Goff devoured the beef steaks with relish and satisfaction.

Afterward, they smoked, rested luxuriously in the warmth, and drank some more whiskey in honor of Christmas Eve. They even tried singing a few Carols, but it wasn't much of a success without

Rhoads' pure young voice. And Stryker, Blasser and Morton were preoccupied with the task that lay ahead of them.

"We'd better get that wire up in the South Pass tonight, Dan," said Mark Blasser.

"I reckon we had," agreed Stryker somberly.

"The sky's clearing," Tom Morton remarked from a blanket-draped window. "And there's going to be a moon tonight."

"Is that good—or bad?" asked Selby.

"Both," Dan Stryker said, with a wry grave smile.

"They'll have somebody down there, won't they?" Goff inquired.

Stryker inclined his bronze, gold-glinting head. "Includin' Hackett and Lauck —I hope."

THE NIGHT was warmer, the knife-edge of the air blunted and softened, a crescent moon high and bright in the luminous blue, shedding silvery radiance over the white-glittering December earth, when the five Rawhide riders reached South Pass. The stars were sharp as frosty steel points in the clear sky, as they approached the narrow passage through which Horse Creek had cut the ridges into Goshen Hole.

The log line house here was larger than the one at the northern entrance, standing with a frame barn on a shelf overlooking the trail. This time they made sure that nobody was hiding in either structure, and Stryker thought they could thank the Holiday for that.

The Crown and Anvil gun-hands were probably celebrating in Cheyenne. The big ranchers would be wining, dining and dancing in the Inter-Ocean Hotel and the Cheyenne Club, or loading costly presents on Christmas Trees at home.

Leaving their horses in the barn, they appropriated additional and essential tools —picks, spades, shovels, crowbars, mauls and hammers. Stripping off their heavy outer jackets, they uncovered the cached rolls of wire and long pointed posts, and went to work in the moonlight, maintaining a watchful lookout to the south.

The frozen stony soil made the digging of post holes a difficult and tedious operation, but the men worked hard, fast and doggedly, sweating freely in the winter night, and finally planting the wooden uprights, deep and solid.

Stryker and Blasser, the biggest and strongest, spelled one another at the sledging. The wire, rigid from the cold, was cumbersome and maddening to handle, but they managed to unroll and string it, hammer it securely to one pole after another.

It was a long slow job though, and hours before it was completed they heard the faint rumbling movement of a vast herd in the distance, the thin bawling and wailing of driven stock. That blizzard, striking the southerly ranges, had brought about an earlier drive than planned on. Christmas or not, the beef of Anvil, Crown and the other great spreads, was on its way to the winter graze and shelter of Goshen.

And the riders from the Rawhide were barely in time with their wire blockade. Rough on the innocent cattle, but the only possible chance of forcing Big John Duffield and Lute Bromley into a compromising agreement, that would permit the Rawhide herds to winter safely in the Hole.

Toward morning a wind came up, whipping icily from the north, and with it came more snow and scudding black clouds, that quickly blotted out the myriad stars and the curved silver blade of the moon. The temperature dropped rapidly under the darkening heavens, and the men withdrew to the barn to rest briefly, drink whiskey from canteens, and don buffalo and sheepskin jackets, now that the hardest labor was done.

Stryker, puffing wearily on a cigarette, stroked the neck of young Rhoads' chestnut mare, which he was riding since the death of his gray gelding. Tom Morton went into the cabin to build up a fire, anticipating the urgent need of one, once their grilling chore was done.

"Come on, let's string the rest of it," Dutch Goff said, with a final warming swig from his canteen. "I'd rather work than lay back dreadin' it."

The other four went out to finish the task, while Morton was kindling his fire in the log-house. The skies were graying and lightening now, with the approach of morning, but the wind was roaring with greater velocity than ever, scourging the men along the fence with sleet and snow.

They were on the alert for an enemy vanguard from the south, but rather heedless of any menace from the interior of Goshen Hole to the north.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fence at South Pass

GOFF was nailing the final strand to the last post at the far canyon wall, with Selby holding the wire taut for him, while Stryker and Blasser gathered up the tools. Gunfire blasted from behind them, flattened and muted under the vicious scream of the gale.

Dutch Goff pitched forward, groaning and cursing in disgust, and hung slackly on the fence. Selby spun, drew, and fired once before the lead found him, beating him back onto the wire, spilling him at the foot of it.

Stryker and Blasser dropped the tools and dived for the nearest scant cover of low hummocks, drawing their guns and watching the lurid muzzle flashes streak elongated down the wind toward them. They were pinned down, helpless, with at least five rifles blazing away at them, the close shriek of bullets keeping them tight to the snowy ground. Goff was still hanging on the wire in a stark crucified attitude, and Selby sprawled silently at his feet.

Tom Morton came out the cabin door, a crouched slender figure, and opened up with his carbine, firing swiftly and calmly into the teeth of the storm, diverting the enemy attack to himself. Up the trail a man yelled in pain, and tumbled down a brush-covered slope.

Morton went on levering, aiming and squeezing off his shots, with bullets breezing all around him, chipping the logs and splintering windows. Quiet, methodical, steady as ever, Tom Morton was, and from below Stryker and Blasser chimed in with their sixguns now.

But it was Tom Morton's Winchester that broke the back of the assault, and put the enemy to rout. Another dark figure

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reared up behind a boulder, and fell face-down across it, humped loosely in death.

With a final fusillade that drove Tom back inside the house, the other three assailants broke and scattered, scrambling for the cover of the barn. Stryker and Blasser, on their feet and moving forward, lined running shots at the last man, who went down suddenly as if tripped, skidding headlong in the snow, and lay crumpled at the base of a cedar trunk.

Two of them left, and even in that vague gusty light, Stryker was certain those two were the tall lank Hackett and the short squat Lauck, Duffield's ace gunmen. Leaning into the wind and stumbling through snowdrifts, Stryker and Blasser went after them. And downtrail, beyond the new fence, the lead steers of Crown and Anvil were already looming darkly in the chill grayness of early morning.

Lucky Lauck, weighed down by fat and exhausted from struggling through snowbanks, floundered heavily against the barn door and fumbled at the handle. The door stuck, frozen slightly in place, and the panting sobbing Lauck pushed away from it and lifted his gun.

But Mark Blasser threw down and drilled him twice through the plump middle, and Lauck's last shot exploded harmlessly into the air, as he doubled up and fell like a huge ungainly frog, stubby limbs jerking spasmodically, never moving again.

HACKETT had rounded the far corner of the barn. Dan Stryker said, "This one's mine, Mark," and went striding on after him, calling aloud: "Come on, Hack. Just you and me!" He paused at the edge of the building and listened intently. Dimly, under the wind, he could hear the rasped agony of Hackett's breathing in the shelter of the board wall.

"What's the matter, Hack?—afraid?"

"I'm waitin'," Hackett shouted back. "Come and get me if you can, big boy!"

Stryker reloaded his Colt, leaving his gloves tucked in under his belt, wanting his hands bare, free and unencumbered for this fight, even in the freezing cold. Stryker found a dead stick and thrust his fur cap beyond the cornice. A shot snatched it immediately from the stick.

Stryker hit the snow in a long flat dive, sliding past the corner, firing from the ground just as flame blossomed from Hackett's hand.

Stryker rolled quickly and came lithely onto his feet, thumbing off another fast shot. Hackett slumped against the side of the structure, gasping and moaning, trying to lift his drooping gun-hand, blasting into the earth between them, spraying Stryker's boots wetly.

Stryker turned loose his Colt .44 once more, holding it firm in his right hand, fanning the hammer with the heel of his left palm, thinking bitterly of all the good men who had died in this senseless war. Flame spurted in torrents, the reports blending thunderously, and Hackett's lanky form rocked and twisted with the slashing impacts, that tore him off the planks, twirled him like a tall disjointed puppet, and flung him at last face-down and shot to pieces in the snow.

Wheeling wearily, spent and sick and numb, drained of all emotion, Dan Stryker plodded around to the front of the barn, nodding slowly to Blasser and Morton, walking on toward the cabin.

The other two men went out after Goff and Selby, with the point of that herd coming closer in the wan smoking light beneath the storm. Dutch Goff, who had come back from the dead once, was really gone this time, but Selby was only wounded, with a chance of pulling through. Tom Morton did the best he could for the boy, who was mercifully unconscious, while Mark Blasser gathered up all the weapons, with Stryker checking and reloading them.

Then there was nothing to do but wait, drink the whiskey they sorely needed, and watch the Crown and Anvil cattle surge on toward that fence in the South Pass, on this bleak and ghastly Christmas morning. The cabin was snug and warm, but it seemed as if a score of men were missing, and the sound of Selby's painful breathing was like a file across their raw fretted nerves.

Looking at Blasser and Morton, Stryker saw that they had aged years in the past two days and nights, and he knew that his own bronze-stubbled sunken-cheeked face must look even older, more worn, wasted and haggard than theirs.

IN THE first, faint, faraway glow of dawn, lemon-colored and unearthly in the east, the lead steers were jammed against the wire barricade, bawling and lowing plaintively, fighting the fence and one another, pressed inexorably forward by the massed weight of the herd behind them. Some were already entangled and crippled, freezing and moaning, while others were down, trampled and crushed to death.

On either side of the defile, cursing raging riders fought to hold the herd and ease the pressure, firing futile shots at the log cabin from time to time.

Stryker and Blasser, carbines in hand, were watching the dammed-up tidal wave of beef in South Pass, when Tom Morton spoke from a window on the north side of the house: "Somebody coming out of the Hole. Looks like a woman and a young kid."

Then he swore softly, an unusual thing for Tom to do. "Why, it's Carol Duffield and Young Mac—McMinn's boy from Laramie!"

In a few minutes they were inside the cabin, Carol in Stryker's arms, the Mcminn boy shaking hands and explaining to Morton and Blasser. "They brought Dad's body into town, and Miss Carol wanted to ride out here. So I rode along with her. Is there goin' to be any more fightin'?" There was a hopeful note in his choked youthful voice.

"We hope not, son," said Tom Morton gently.

"Well, I see you got quite a few of 'em, anyway," Young Mac said.

Stryker was saying to the girl: "You shouldn't have come all the way out here, Carol."

"I had to, Dan," she said simply. "I had to see if you were all right. And I wanted to be with you to celebrate Christmas."

"Some Christmas," said Stryker, shaking his high tawny head. "You might have got lost and frozen, Carol—both of you."

"We knew the trail, and we dressed for it," Carol told him. "It wasn't too bad last night, Dan."

"Warm up by the fire," Stryker advised. "We'll take care of your horses for you."

"I'll get them, Dan," said Morton, and went out to do so.

"Dad never had a chance, I guess," the McMinn boy said, bravely trying to sound matter-of-fact. "Hit three times, only fired one shot. I figure he was bushwhacked."

"Don't think about it, kid," Stryker said. "Mac died brave. He was a good man."

Young Mac swallowed and nodded. "Can I have his job, Dan? I'm big enough to work now."

Stryker patted his head. "You sure can, Young Mac." And he was glad they had taken the money from those Crown and Anvil bodies. The considerable sum would be a great help to the McMinn and Fulbright families.

"Hey, Dan," Mark Blasser called from a south window. "Big John Duffield and Lute Bromley both just rode in down there."

DUFFIELD'S foghorn bellow reached them a moment later: "You in the shack, come out and talk! There won't be any more of this shootin'—not for awhile yet."

"We'll talk from here," Stryker yelled back through a broken window. "What you want?"

"You, Stryker? Damn your soul! Get that wire fence down. Cattle are dyin' on it."

"How do you like it, John? Our cattle died on your fences. We want to bargain with you. Our herds stay in Goshen Hole."

"Bargain, hell! You're goin' to hang for this, if you live that long!" roared Duffield. "My crew'll circle round over the hills and blow that flimsy little shanty apart."

"No, they won't. We've got dynamite here. Enough to blast your whole herd and crew. Hackett and Lauck are dead, Duffield. Keeshan and Skowron and a lot of others, too. You goin' to be reasonable?"

Duffield and the fat Bromley conferred hastily. Big John shouted through cupped hands: "All right, all right, cut the wire! We can't get to it."

"Our cattle can winter in the Hole, then?"

"Yes, dammit, yes! Just rip that fence down, Stryker. Good beef's dyin' every minute!"

"Put it in writin', you and Bromley sign it," ordered Stryker.

John Duffield pulled out a notebook, scribbled rapidly, and passed it to Lute Bromley for his signature.

"Send a man up with it," Stryker commanded, hoarse with yelling.

"And have him murdered there?" howled Duffield.

Carol stepped quickly out of the door, and moved into plain view of her father and the others below in the cattle-choked passage. Even at that distance, the shocked astonishment of Big John and his followers was discernible.

"There won't be any more killing," Carol Duffield announced clearly. "I'll take that paper from your rider, and I'll see that the agreement holds."

"Carol! What are you doin' with that bunch of riffraff killers?"

"Your gunmen started it, Dad. Now there are thirteen dead from Crown and Anvil. Five dead, one wounded, from the Rawhide. That's enough, more than enough. Any more fighting and I'll be in it—on this side! Are you willing to make peace?"

Her father gestured helplessly. "Yes, Carol, yes. There won't be any more fightin'. Make 'em cut that fence, Carol, for the love of God!"

"Pull off your steers and we'll cut it," Stryker shouted. "Hold 'em back, don't let 'em stampede, or we'll use the dynamite."

Big John Duffield barked out at his riders, and they rode in from either side, lashing at the brute heads and muzzles to force them back from the wire, shooting the animals they couldn't handle any other way.

A LONE man on foot was clambering awkwardly up the steep wall of the Pass, and working his way forward in thigh-deep drifts toward the log house on the shelf. Carol Duffield met him, accepted and studied her father's written statement, waved the messenger back, and returned to the cabin, handing Stryker the paper.

"It will hold, Dan," she said. "I'll see that it does."

"I sure hope so," Stryker drawled. "It's a good thing you came out here, Cary—after all."

Tom Morton came back from the barn with the wire-cutters, smiling soberly and shaking his brown head. "I hope you

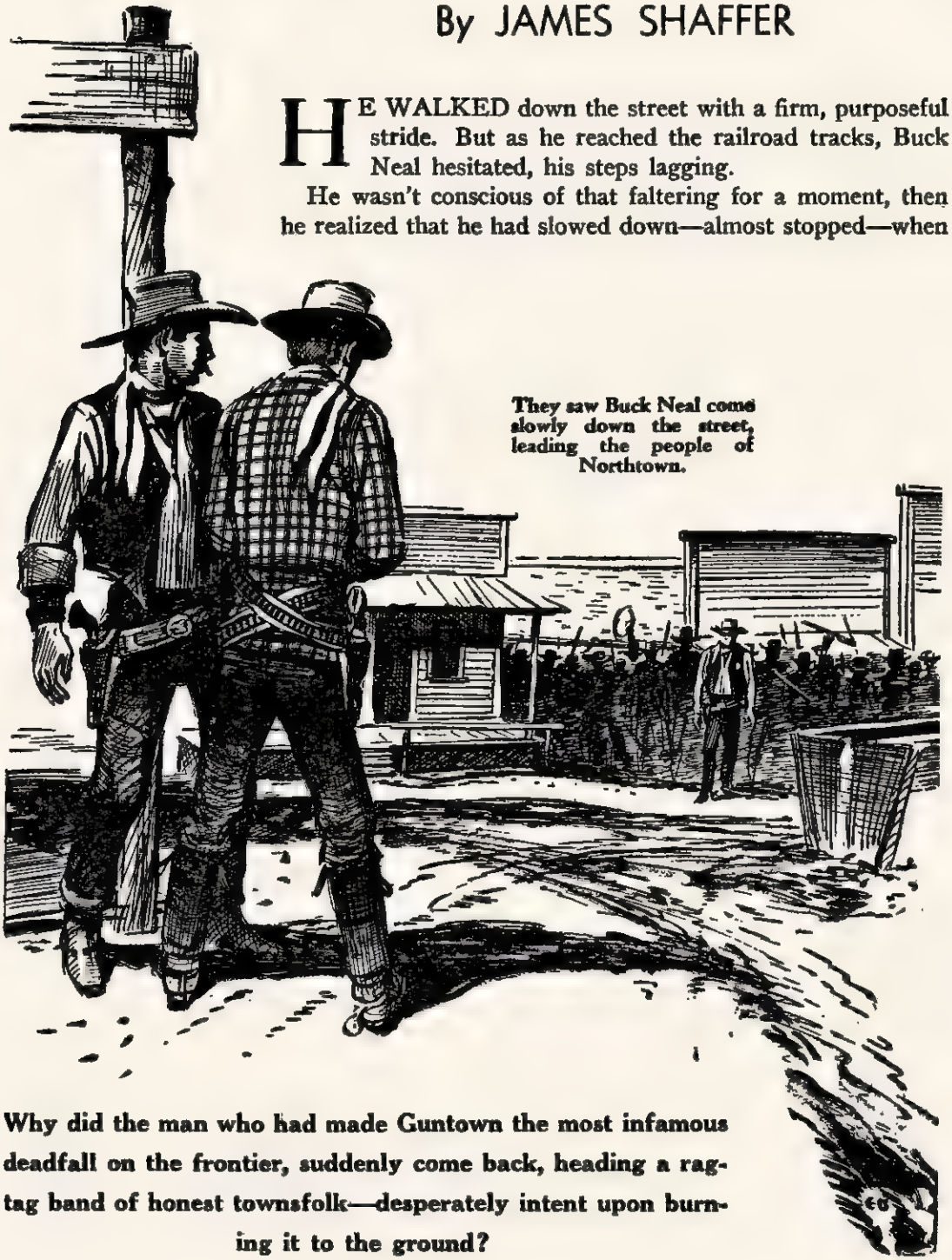
(Continued on page 127)

HELLTOWN'S GOOD-BYE

By JAMES SHAFFER

HE WALKED down the street with a firm, purposeful stride. But as he reached the railroad tracks, Buck Neal hesitated, his steps lagging.

He wasn't conscious of that faltering for a moment, then he realized that he had slowed down—almost stopped—when



They saw Buck Neal come slowly down the street, leading the people of Northtown.

Why did the man who had made Guntown the most infamous deadfall on the frontier, suddenly come back, heading a ragtag band of honest townsfolk—desperately intent upon burning it to the ground?

he reached the tracks. He swore a good-natured oath, and there was a chuckling laugh on his lips as he stepped over the tracks.

"Guntown," he thought with that same chuckle. "I helped give it that name. I helped make it. And I can break it."

Then he saw Myra, stepping around the corner of the new, garishly painted depot building. He knew every detail of her face and figure by heart, but even so, his eyes fastened on her with the intensity of a thirst-maddened man sighting water. He felt his pulse quicken as it always had, and his hands and feet seemed suddenly too big and clumsy. Awkward and boyish.

She had that ridiculous little parasol held high, shielding her face from the glare of the midday sun. In the shadow of it her full lips curved upward in that slow smile that always made him catch his breath.

"Are you going down there—alone?" She inclined her head to indicate the broad, dusty street flanked by gaudily painted buildings, that stretched away from the railroad tracks.

Guntown.

The wildest spot west of the Mississippi and east of Frisco. A quarter of mile of concentrated deviltry, vice and corruption. The devil's domain, where sin was the only virtue, and a slow draw the only sin. He took a long look at it, seeing it as it was now, and remembering how it was when he'd first seen it—back in the days when the first herds came up from Texas

There had been no town north of the tracks then. No town of prim little houses, neat, tree-shaded streets and tidy little stores, such as there was now. There had been just Guntown, to the south of the tracks.

A miserable collection of tar paper shacks, thrown helter-skelter around the unpainted railroad depot. The "hotel" had been a long tent, with spaces marked off where a man could unroll his blankets. The "Parisian Cafe" had been behind the livery stable—a long counter on two barrels. Serving beefsteaks at a nickel, fried eggs at five dollars the egg.

Yes, that's the way it had been, and not too long ago, either. Just a few short, incredible years—from that collection of shacks, to this two part town of today. The prim, neat town to the north—and this garish, gaudy spot of sin to the south.

"Are you telling me I shouldn't walk Guntown alone?" he asked with a chuckle. "You walk it alone. Why shouldn't I?"

"You know very well why," she answered, with that quick toss of her head he knew so well. "I work here. I'm part of Guntown. But you're marked for death."

He'd heard that before, and he reacted with a quick chuckle.

"You're being over-dramatic. But then—I forgot—you're an actress. Your business is being dramatic."

"You fool!" The intensity of her voice dried the chuckle in his throat. "Do you think I'm being dramatic when I point out the obvious? That badge you're wearing—it'll make a fine target for one of Cal Larson's gunmen!"

HE SEARCHED her face, wondering if she'd heard anything definite from her boss—Cal Larson. But then he decided not. She was merely pointing out the obvious—as she had said. But she was still new to this country. There were some things, some methods of procedure, she didn't know. He shook his head.

"They won't start it," he told her with quiet soberness. "The Guntowners won't open this play. They'll wait. They won't fire the first shot. They'll hold back, hoping that the whole thing will blow over. That the folks in Northtown will wear themselves out making speeches, and be too tired to take the final step."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Remember, I know these people in Guntown—as well as I know the folks of Northtown. Guntowners have heard talk of cleanups before. They all came to nothing. They're hoping this one will blow over, the same as the rest. And that they'll be let alone to continue their trade as before."

"But will it blow over this time?" Her eyes dropped to the bright, shiny badge on his calfskin vest. "Are you going through with it?"

He nodded. "It goes through on schedule."

Her eyes searched his, and for a moment he was lost in their blue depths, seeing and feeling the promise of a future that could be his—for the taking.

"Why?" The one word question was a whisper.

"Maybe it's because I like decent things," he said slowly, and then his old, reckless self took over again. He laughed. "And maybe it's because I'm a fool!"

"I don't know about the other, but about being a fool—" there was a choke in her voice, and the hint of tears in her eyes—"with that I agree!"

If it had been in her mind to stop him at the station and keep him from going into Guntown, she had forgotten that intention now. She swung in beside him as he started down the rough plank sidewalk. He felt her hand slip into the crook of his elbow and rest lightly on his arm, and felt a warm tingle spread through him at her touch.

There were few people abroad at this hour. Guntown slept through the day, came roaring to life at sundown. Still, he knew that dozens of eyes were following his progress down the street with Myra, as he walked toward Cal Larson's Mile o' Pleasure House.

The biggest, gaudiest—and deadliest—house on the street. That was Larson's place. A big building, covering half a block and running back a hundred feet from the street. A man could find anything he wanted there—whiskey, gambling, girls, and dramatic plays staged by Myra Dawn and her troupe of New York Thespians.

A man could also find death in Larson's Mile o' Pleasure. In fact, a dozen men a week found just that—death.

He mounted the broad steps to the place, across the wide veranda and through the swinging doors into the cool, dim interior. It took a moment for his eyes to focus inside, and then he saw them all lined up at the bar. Twenty-seven men who owned honkytonks in Guntown. With Cal Larson as their leader.

Larson pushed himself away from the bar and walked toward him now, a tall figure, faultlessly dressed. He looked more like a senator than what he was. He

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lifted his hand in a mocking, sardonic salute.

"Marshal Buck Neal," he murmured. "We're honored at your visit—and a little surprised." His eyes flicked toward Myra, and Buck Neal caught the order in the glance. But the girl ignored her boss and stayed there. She stayed, until Buck himself disengaged his arm and motioned her away. She hesitated a moment, until he looked into her eyes. Then she moved off. Buck turned back to Larson.

"Surprise, Larson? I don't get it. I told you I'd be here, and here I am."

"We'll remember to put on your tombstone some words about your bravery," Larson drawled languidly, and Buck Neal had to laugh at that. His laugh was cut short as Rory Grandin stepped out of the crowd at the bar. Rory's Imperial Club was second in size to Larson's place.

"Cut the small talk," Rory grunted, shifting his cigar in his teeth. "Buck, you know what we want to know. Are you going through with this? Do we have to fight to stay in business?"

"I'm going through with it," Buck told him. "And whether you fight or not, you won't stay in business. You're licked, Rory—all of you. And you know it. It's too late for compromise. You had your warnings to clean up Guntown. You didn't. Now Northtown will do the job itself."

"With you leading 'em?" That from Spence Craighead. Spence was one of the old timers on the street. He'd tried to run a nice place. But in Guntown—it was hopeless.

"They elected me marshal," Buck told him. "I took the job, knowing I had this cleanup job to do."

"But why?" Craighead persisted. "Why should you lead 'em, Buck? You used to be one of us. You came here with one of the first herds up from Texas. Stayed on because you liked it here. You were as much a part of Guntown—"

"The old Guntown, Spence," Buck cut in. "The old, wild, carefree Guntown. Not this vicious, murderous acre of hell it is now. Not this Guntown where a man can get killed for the few dollars in his jeans—where the only law you know is greed."

"Greed!" Cal Larson's voice cut in like a whiplash. "You're a fine one to talk about greed, Neal. With what you're planning to do."

"Just what you mean by that, Larson?"

LARSON laughed. "Don't you think we Guntowners know who's behind this cleanup? Johnson and McCulley! Your fine, sanctimonious bankers!"

"Watch your tongue, Larson!"

"It's time it was said!" Rory Grandin blurted. "Johnson and McCulley rigged up this cleanup idea. They aim to have the town run us out—then move in and take over. It's just a move for them to own Guntown without spending a cent!"

"Take my word for it—all of you—nobody will profit from this deal. Guntown will be cleaned out, then burned to the ground."

He faced them there at the bar, his big hands dangling over the butts of his big Colt sixguns.

"I told you I'd give you one last warning to move out, before I led the Northtowners in their cleanup. This is it. Your final warning. At sunset tonight, we start. Be out of town then—or ready to fight."

He turned on his heel and left. It seemed to take him hours to reach the big doors and step into the hot freedom of the street. Only when he was outside, did he realize that his shoulders had been hunched, prepared for the searing shock of a slug in the back. Now relief flooded through him, and he felt the hot sweat break out all over his body. He swung north, toward the tracks again.

But at the corner of the Mile o' Pleasure House, a soft arm reached out and

stopped him with a firm, gentle touch.

"Come up to my room," Myra said, and then forced a note of gaiety in her voice. "You look like you could use a drink."

He followed her up the outside stairway to the rooms above where her drama group lived. She pushed him into an overstuffed chair, brought him a drink and sat on the arm of the chair while he sipped it.

"Buck," she said, her fingers sliding through his hair, their touch cool to his tingling scalp, "you're not going through with it?"

"You're not starting that again, are you?" he asked with a laugh.

She whirled away, returning with a hand mirror. "Look at yourself! Look in the mirror—at your face! You're twenty-five years old. Yet there are lines in your face a man of forty shouldn't have. And for what?"

"For decency maybe," he laughed. "Or like I said, because I'm a fool."

"Then quit being a fool." She put the mirror away and slid her arms around him. "Be what you really are, Buck. A man in love."

"With you?"

"Deny it?"

"No. Not for the past month, anyhow."

"Then why don't we go away—get married?"

"Why do you always put it that way?" he asked. "Go away, and then get married. Why don't you say get married—finish my job here—and then go away?"

"Because I want a live man for a husband. Not a dead hero. I want Buck Neal for a husband, I want him alive and strong. Strong enough to crush my ribs with his arms, to make me gasp for breath when he hugs me. I don't want just a memory for a husband. Even if it is the memory of the man who cleaned up Guntown!"

"It's the same old argument," he grinned. "And we won't settle it now any more than we have in the past."

SHE wiggled down into the chair beside him, pushed her head under his chin. The soft silkiness of her hair was against his cheek, and the faint odor of it was strong in his nostrils. She turned her face up, put her lips close to his.

"There's a surrey and fast team in the barn out back. In an hour we could be miles from here. Away from Northtown—from Guntown—from the whole rotten mess. By tonight we could be in Leadville. Married. I'd be Mrs. Buck Neal."

"And I'd be Buck Neal, the marshal who ran out on his job."

"Then you won't?"

"Yes, I will—after the job's over."

"Buck, you won't get this job finished. You won't live through it. Can't you realize what'll happen? That crowd will march down from Northtown, and who'll be in front of it? That star on your vest will be the best target in the world."

"I took the job knowing all that," he said simply, putting his glass down and getting to his feet. "As I said, Myra, after the job is—"

"Don't say it, Buck. Remember the surrey and team. They're out back—waiting for us—you and me."

"And so are the people of Northtown," he said, picking up his hat.

"You mean Johnson and McCulley are waiting." There was a dead, hopeless note in her voice. "They're waiting for you to make them a fortune. They're waiting for you to hand them Guntown on a platter—without it costing them one cent."

"I'll see you later," he muttered and strode out the door.

"I won't be here. I'll be gone—with the rest of Guntown. I'm a part of this town, remember? When you drive Guntown out, you drive me out, too!"

He didn't wait to hear more, but went

down the outside steps fast. And turning the corner of the building, he almost bumped into Cal Larson. The man's eyes narrowed quickly and he flung a glance up the stairs. Buck watched his hands, waiting for any move toward the little derringers he carried in his vestpockets. But Larson was careful that way. His smile was tight and hard.

"She tried to stop you, eh? But you're still going through with it."

"You've always known I was going through with it, Larson."

"You're going to make a good target coming down the street at the head of your psalm-singing crew," Larson laughed and glanced again up the stairs. "You're a fool to cut your life so short, when there's so much to live for."

"I've told myself that I'm a fool," Buck laughed. "So it doesn't worry me, hearing it from you."

Larson's face turned pink with anger. "I could lift a finger and you wouldn't get out of Guntown alive. You know that, don't you?"

"I do," Buck answered. "I also know you won't do it. And I'd give odds that Guntown won't even fight, when the time comes. Guntown will fold and run."

"At least that will save Johnson and McCulley the expense of repairing bullet-shattered windows," Larson grunted and turned away. Buck stared after him a moment, the names of the two bankers lingering in his mind.

He was remembering that it had been Johnson and McCulley who'd first spread talk about the wickedness of Guntown. He remembered other things, too, and then swung his footsteps toward the Northtown National Bank.

ALVAH JOHNSON leaned his fat bulk back in his swivel chair as Buck came in. His round, florid face broke into a genial smile. But Buck noticed—for the first time—that the man's eyes didn't know how to smile. They stayed cold and calculating.

"Come in and set, marshal," the banker boomed. "What's on your mind?"

"Everything's set, isn't it?" a nervous voice twittered from the doorway. Luke McCulley's skinny body seemed to twitch, rather than walk, into the office. He dry-washed his bony hands—a never-ending ritual with him. "Nothing's gone wrong? The raid'll go off as scheduled?"

"There you go, worrying again," Johnson laughed at his partner. "What could go wrong, with the marshal leading things? Eh, marshal?"

"That's right," Buck grinned. "I just wanted to make sure that the volunteer fire department is standing by, when we touch a match to Guntown."

He let his voice trail off, flicking his eyes from one to the other. The faint, ugly suspicion that had been born in his mind down in Guntown began to grow and flourish like a bad weed.

"Yeah, the fire department," Johnson stammered.

"If the wind should change, after we've fired Guntown, it could cause plenty of trouble—keep it from jumping the tracks into Northtown."

"Um, yeah, marshal." Alvah Johnson's face got redder and McCulley scrubbed his hands furiously. "It looks like it's about time we had a talk, Buck," the fat banker went on. "I mean about firing Guntown."

"That was the plan, wasn't it?" Buck asked quickly. "Run the Guntown people off, then touch a match to the whole business."

"Yeah, sure," Johnson grunted quickly. "That's the kind of talk it took to stir things up. To get the people ready to go through with this thing. But marshal—you're a smart man—and an ambitious one." He laughed. "Yeah, you need money to keep that little girl—what's her name?—in clothes. An actress like that,

they like someone to buy them pretty things."

"What're you driving at, Johnson?"

The fat banker leaned across the desk, his florid face flushed and hot. "You're looking at the new owners of Guntown, after tonight. But don't think we're going to leave you out."

"So it *was* a trick," Buck muttered, half to himself. "What do you think the Northtowners are going to say about it? They want Guntown wiped out. They want their town to be a decent place to live in. To get married and raise families."

"You're the marshal, aren't you?" Luke McCulley's voice was a nervous chittering. "What can they say?"

"Yeah, what can they say?" Buck repeated and kicked his chair back. He stalked out, and out on the street once more, turned his steps southward.

He felt curious stares on him as he crossed the tracks and swung briskly down the sidewalk toward the Mile o' Pleasure House. And word that he was back spread through Guntown like wildfire. Before he'd gone half a block, most of Guntown was standing in doorways or peering through windows at him as he walked along.

He reached the corner of Larson's place, and took the outside stairs two at a time. Myra's door was shut. He knocked, then went in without giving her a chance to answer it.

She stood up as he entered, but she didn't come toward him. He searched her face for that familiar look, but it wasn't there. Her face was cold, lifeless, impassive. He walked over and slid his arms around her. But her body was rigid, she didn't melt against him.

"So you found out what a fool you've been?" Her voice was brittle, mocking.

He tried to grin back at her. "That surrey and fast team you spoke of. Where are they? We'll use 'em."

BUT her body stayed rigid, and she didn't give herself up to him. "You found out Johnson and McCulley's game, didn't you? You found they'd played you for a fool!"

"Leadville tonight," he forced a chuckle into his voice. "Mrs. Buck Neal."

"And when you found out what a fool you'd been, you came running back to me. I wasn't your first choice. I was second. Only then—after you found out your fine friends had played you false."

"I'm back," he snapped. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"No, I don't want it this way. I don't want to be your second choice. I want to be first in my man's life—not the thing he comes back to when all else fails him."

"Now listen, Myra—it's not the way you think at all.

"Get out of here!" She drew back her hand and slashed him across the face. "Get back to your Northtowners and lead them in your decency crusade."

Then she was gone, twisting out of his grasp and running down the hall into another room. He went after her, tried the door. But it was locked. He knocked and called, but she wouldn't answer.

He went back to Northtown. There was no place in Guntown for him. He headed for the livery and his horse, because there was no place in Northtown for him, now. He led his horse out of the stall and threw the saddle on. And then shadows fell across the floor. People gathered at the big livery stable door.

"We're ready, marshal." Preacher Donovan's voice was steady and controlled. The shotgun looked awkward in his bony hands.

"It's near sundown—and that's the time we said." Pell Watkins looked more at home behind the counter of his dry goods store, than he did now, with two big pistols shoved in his belt.

"You ain't aiming to ride horseback, are you, marshal?" John Langer's wife

had been knocked down by a drunken Guntowner two weeks before. "But mebbe you'd make a harder target to hit, on a horse."

"Don't you worry about that part of it, marshal," a half dozen voices chimed in. "We don't aim for you to be out front by yourself. We aim to close in around you."

Buck's hand closed over the horn of his saddle. He started to say something, then changed his mind. He jerked the saddle off and smacked the horse on the rump, driving him back into the stall. Then he lifted both his guns, tested their hammer action, and dropped them back into leather.

"Let's go, boys."

A ragged shout went up as he stepped into the street and started down its dusty length toward the shiny ribbons of steel that separated the two towns. The townspeople closed in tight around him. He slowed down and ordered them to spread out, but they ignored that order and kept close.

Passing the bank, he slowed again. Johnson and McCulley came outside, and Alvah Johnson took a deep breath and started to make a speech. He only got one or two words out.

"That comes later," Buck told him with a grin. "We'll wait for you while you get your hats, gentlemen."

The two bankers stood there a moment. McCulley's dry hands rasped as he twisted them. Alvah Johnson's eyes narrowed for a thoughtful moment, then he swung his big bulk back into the bank. He came out clapping his hat on, and strapping a businesslike gunbelt around his ponderous waist. McCulley trailed after him.

"We're right behind you, marshal," Johnson said, as he pushed his way into the crowd. Buck glanced at him, saw the glint of cold humor there, then picked up the step again.

GUNTOWN saw them coming. They poured out of the honkytonks, the deadfalls and the clip joints. Sleek-haired gamblers, their poker faces twitching nervously in the dying rays of the sun, their white fingers nervously caressing gun butts. Slouchy, dead-eyed gunmen leaned against lamp posts and hitching rails, their hands hanging loose, watching from the corner of their eyes for the signal to earn their pay. Heavily painted percentage girls scattered out of doors like frightened coveys of quail, to gather in a chattering mass at the far end of Guntown.

And finally came the owners of the places. Stepping out of their respective doorways with their weapons belted on, ready to fight for their right to sin and rob.

This—and more—Buck Neal saw as he led the Northtowners down the street. The dust hung thick in the gathering twilight as the Northtowners reached the tracks, paused a moment, then swept on into Guntown.

Buck Neal's eyes swung toward the Mile o' Pleasure House. For a moment they flicked upward toward that outside stairway, then came back to the big front door on the street level. Cal Larson stood in the big double doors, his black frock coat flung back and the white handles of his fancy guns white and bright in the lowering murk of evening.

"Cut loose your wolf, Larson!" Buck Neal yelled. "Make your play now—or ride!"

Larson's hands dipped for his guns. He twisted his head around to look at his fellow Guntowners. Half a block down the street, a honkytonk owner had quietly stepped back inside his place. In another moment, he came out again, only this time he was no longer carrying his rifle.

Across the street, a deadfall owner slowly shoved his sixgun back into leather, a gambler lifted his twin derringers

out of his brocaded vest pockets, then let them slide back in.

Cal Larson's hands never reached his gunbutts. Instead they gripped the edges of his coat, and he drew it together and buttoned it. Then he walked down the steps of the Mile o' Pleasure House and into the street.

"You win, marshal," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Deep down, I always knew we Guntowners wouldn't fight." A laugh welled up in his throat. "Why fight for this? It's easier to walk away and go into business somewhere else."

He turned on his heel and walked off. Like snow before the hot sun, the Guntowners melted away with him. Saddled horses snorted as men hit leather. Buggy wheels squeaked and wagons rattled as the Guntowners faded out of town. Until, in five minutes, there was no one left.

Buck let his guns slide back in their holsters. He lifted his eyes to the upstairs room above the Mile o' Pleasure House. But only blank, dark windows stared back at him.

"ALL right, men!" he called out. "Get your torches ready! Make a good job of it!"

A wild whoop went up, as the crowd started to scatter. They threw away their guns and snatched up their torches. But their happy shouts were broken off short by the blast of a shotgun.

"Hold it!" Alvah Johnson's voice was a bull-like roar. The crowd stopped, turned to look at him. "Men!" his voice was syrupy with persuasion. "It's silly to burn all these buildings. They can be put to good use."

A wild roar of anger came from the crowd. Johnson flung the shotgun up and pulled the trigger. The heavy charge of buckshot whistled inches over the crowd's head. And then like magic, four men materialized out of the dusk to stand at Johnson's side. They had guns half-drawn.

"All right! If you won't do it easy, we'll do it hard!" Johnson's voice was suddenly hard and cold as ice. "These buildings stay put—unless you want to argue with these guns."

"So you hired gunmen?" Buck muttered.

"Sure. After the way you talked, I couldn't be sure of you," the banker rapped out. "But I'm giving you your chance now, marshal! You stand with us, and you'll get your . Well? Make up your mind fast! There's a fortune here—just for the taking."

"I started out to clean up Guntown," Buck told him, "not just change its owners."

"As I figured!" Johnson rasped, and the sixgun in his fist swung toward Buck. He saw it coming and fell flat, jerking at his own guns. He heard Johnson's first slug whine over his head, as he raised his own gun toward that big belly.

Dimly, he saw the gunmen start for their weapons—saw the crowd rush at them—then Buck Neal had time for nothing more, because he was pumping lead into Johnson.

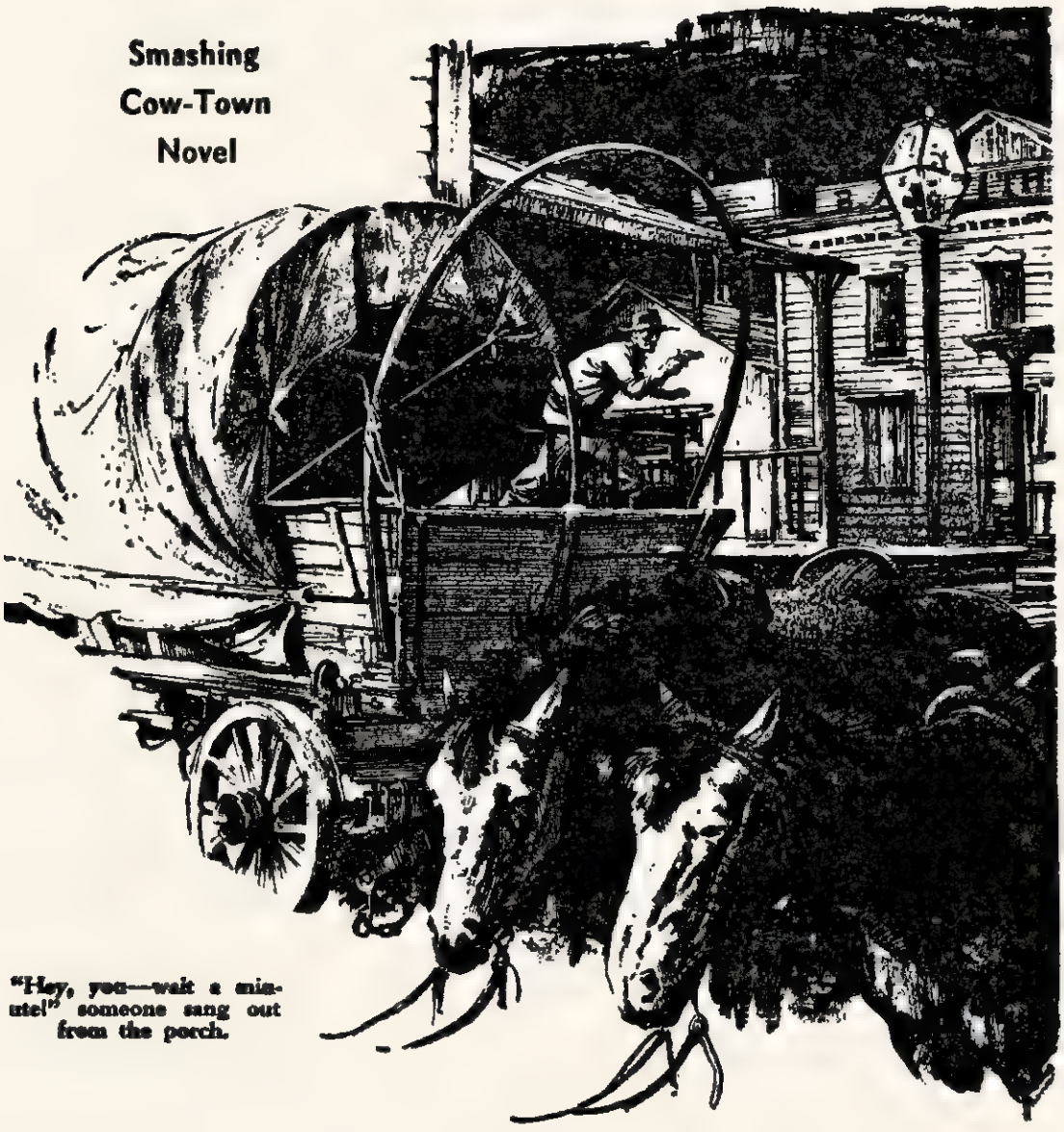
The banker got off two more shots, but his aim was bad—ruined by Buck's first slug that hit just above the belt buckle. The mountain of flesh started to sag. Johnson went to one knee, tried to lift his gun, and couldn't. The gun went off, but the slug plowed the dirt harmlessly. Johnson's big bulk went flabby with death, and there was no more shooting as the crowd overwhelmed Luke McCulley and the other gunmen.

Buck saw the flames begin to lick at the first building. He walked away, feeling dead. Empty. Lifeless. He reached the railroad depot as a shout went up from Guntown. He turned and saw that the Mile o' Pleasure House a mass of

(Continued on page 126)

THE GUNSMOKE

Smashing
Cow-Town
Novel



"Hey, you—wait a minute!" someone sang out from the porch.

A bulging sack filled with ten thousand dollars in dust—that was the official purse of the famed Del Porto Handicap. To Lyle Mendle, that purse meant life or death, with odds standing at a thousand to one for a quick, hot gunsmoke funeral.

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By ROLLAND LYNCH

Smashing Cow-Town Novel

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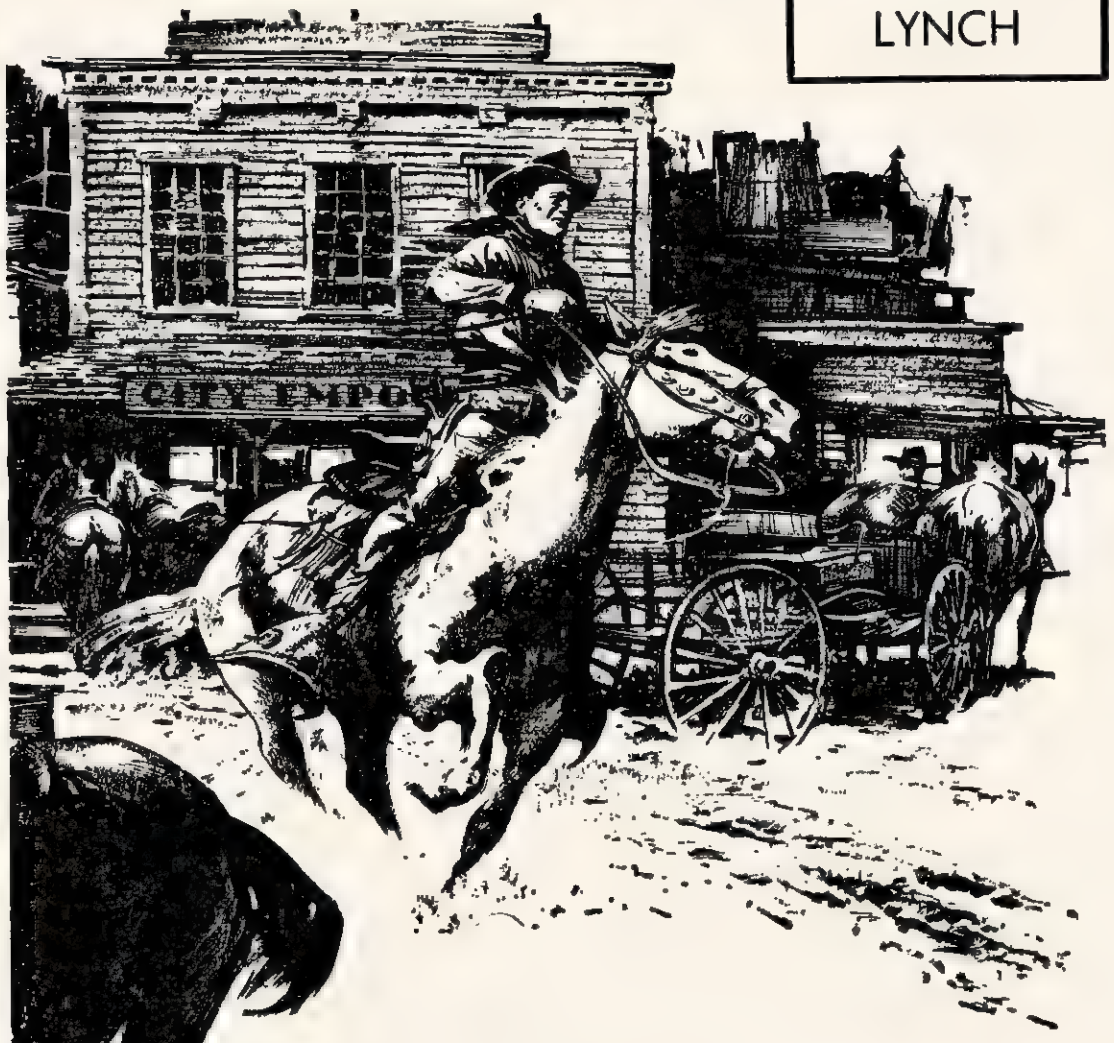


CHAPTER ONE

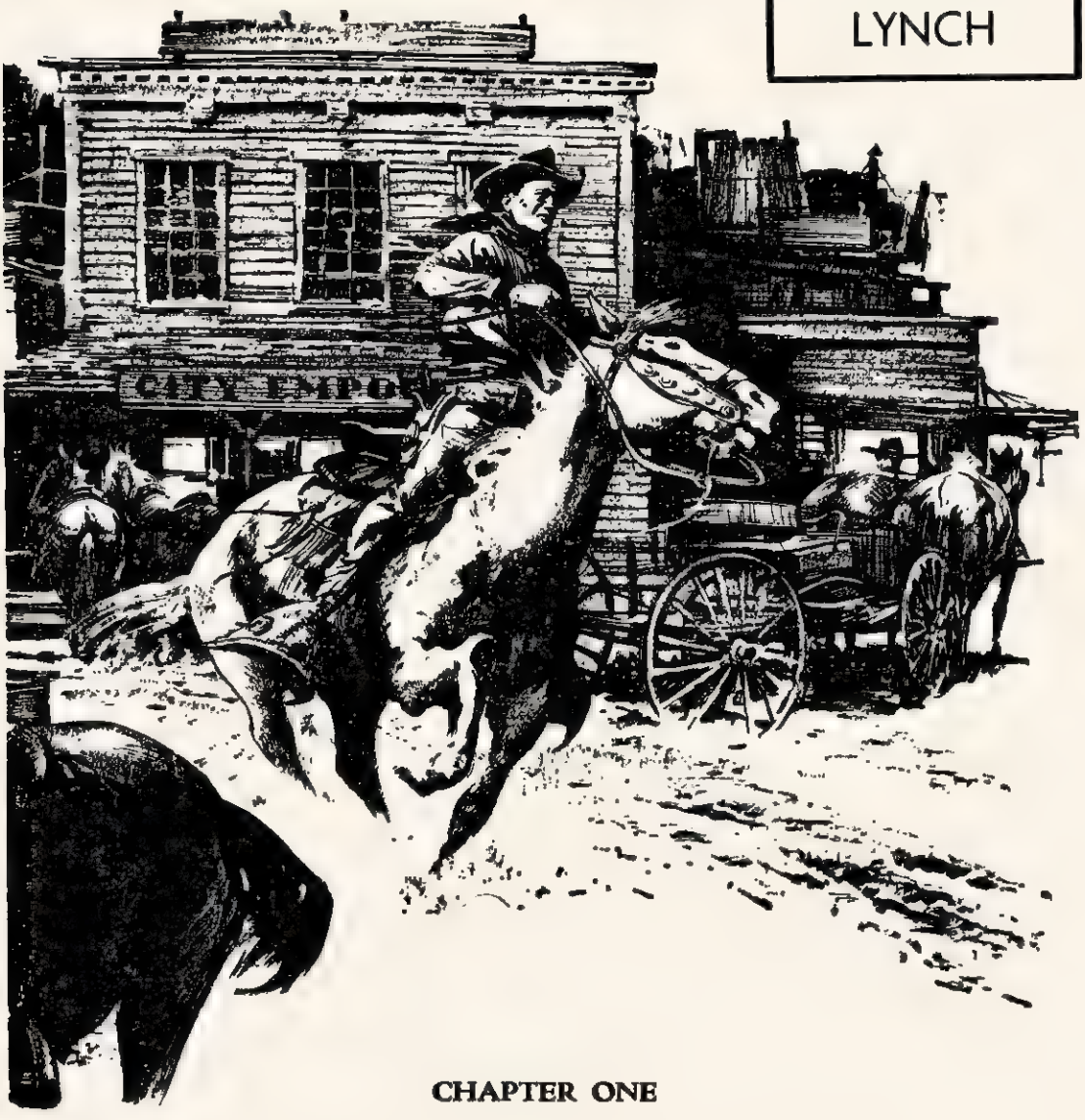
A Long Chance

LYLE MENDLE and Tico Sanchez made an incongruous pair as they hit the main street of Rincon on the dead run this late afternoon. Nor did they rein down, as was their custom, but kept roweling their horses down the street.

Lyle, tall in the saddle, sat straight-backed and grim, his generous lips thinned with anger. Tico, with all his ninety pounds hunched jockey style, was bent over the neck of his mount, his brown, oval face grave. Neither heard the quick call-

HANDICAP

By ROLLAND LYNCH



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ing of Lyle's name until the girl raced her mount up beside them.

"Lyle — Lyle!" she repeated gaily. "Why the tall dust?"

Sharon Winters' voice made Lyle curb his mount. Tico set his animal up, too. The horses milled a cloud of dust and came in together, head to neck.

Sharon's gaiety vanished when she got a glimpse of Lyle Mendle's face. She shifted her eyes to the graveness of Tico Sanchez and then back to Lyle. His laughing blue eyes were chill as gray steel.

"Lyle," she repeated breathlessly, "what in heaven's name—"

"Diablo Star's been stolen!" he cracked out harshly. "Tico and I found the Powder Creek corral fence cut."

"Oh! Who'd—"

"You know who," charged Lyle hotly. "Who would be most interested in Diablo Star? Who would not like to see Star run at the Del Porto Stampede? Who gets the horse and breed ranch if I don't pay off the loan the day of the race?"

"Just a minute," interrupted Sharon, and she, too, now was grave. "Accusing a man of horse stealing is pretty rough. Hart Bradley wouldn't stoop to that!"

"Señorita," put in little Tico Sanchez, "Señor Bradley does not have to stoop to walk beneath a snake, no?"

"Right, Tico," agreed Lyle. "Sharon, what makes you think Bart Bradley wouldn't stoop? Hasn't he always bragged he'd get both you and my breed ranch?"

"I've heard," said Sharon calmly, "he's made a few remarks. But, Lyle, you're angry now—and you know your temper. Hart wouldn't do it."

"He'll have to prove he didn't," said Lyle emphatically. "Sharon, you know what a spot I'm in. I'm gambling my ranch, my future, everything on winning and clearing the place for you."

Her hand came out to rest on his arm. "I appreciate it," she said, "but don't be too hasty."

Lyle's horse curveted away and she saw she had failed to calm him. Lyle tipped his hat, saying, "See you later, Sharon." He gigged his horse on down the street. Tico cast a baleful glance at Sharon Winters and followed.

LYLE reined down before the Rincon National Bank and swung from the saddle. Looping the reins over the hitch rack, he ducked under the rail and turned as he stepped up on the boardwalk. "Wait here," he said to Tico, and went inside.

Mel Wright was there behind the teller's bars. He looked up as Lyle strode in. The grim countenance of the M Bar M youngster made Mel drop his hand below the counter and rest on the .45 he kept there.

Lyle asked gruffly, "Hart in?"

Mel had dealt with Lyle before, but he had never seen temper such as this flaring in him. He had heard stories about that temper and was suddenly aware that what he had heard was true.

"In—in the office," Wright stammered. "I'll tell him you're here."

"I'll tell him," said Lyle and turned toward the office door. He pushed in without knocking.

Hart Bradley sat behind his desk looking down at papers spread before him. His black broadcloth coat and black stock against a white shirt set off his sharp, handsome features. There was a direct contrast between the two. White pallid skin against weathered brown.

He was shorter than Lyle, thicker through the shoulders. Despite his position of bank president, he was not without his strength and courage. Lyle had a feeling someone had just left this room.

Hart looked up as Lyle braced himself at the desk edge. Seeing Lyle's obvious heat, he said quietly, "You seem upset. Can I help you?"

"Just tell me where Diablo Star is," said Lyle, "and I'll go get him."

Hart's lids came down over his eyes.

"Star? Gone?"

"Let's not," suggested Lyle, deadly soft, "beat any bushes, Hart. One week from today you want ten thousand dollars from me—or my breed ranch and stock. Now who'd be most interested in seeing me out of that race?"

Hart pushed back his chair and rose with injured dignity. "My good man," he began with austerity.

"Cut the high and mighty stuff," Lyle snapped him off. "You've pulled every shyster's dodge in the business to get the ranch and humble me before Sharon Winters. Now this. I want my quarter horse back, Hart. I want my chance at that race. If Star fails then you can have it all—and be damned! But I want that chance."

"Are you," choked Hart angrily, "calling me a horse thief?"

Lyle moved around the desk and got hold of Hart by the lapels of his coat. "What do you think?" he barked and bumped Hart's head against the wall.

"Mel!" he cried. "Wright! Get the marshal!"

Lyle slammed Hart up against the wall and stood wide braced before him. "What did you do with him?"

Hart punched out desperately. Lyle batted his arms aside and gripped Hart's coat again. The lapels tore under the banker's squirming. Then the door was flying open and Marshal Carl Working was saying, "Hold it, Mendle! Hold it!" He had a gun in his fist.

Lyle spun Hart and shoved him into his chair. Hart bounced back to his feet and leveled a trembling finger at Lyle.

"He came in here like a mad bull and accused me of being a horse thief," he said angrily. "Marshal, you know I haven't left this town in the last four days."

"That doesn't mean you didn't hire it done," said Lyle.

"Bradley's right," said Working. "Hart's been here all the time."

"Marshal," said Lyle quietly, "you currying favor here—or what is it?"

Working's face reddened. "See here," he began.

HART BRADLEY broke in, and there was a note of triumph in his voice. "He broke in here and began manhandling me, Carl. Look at my coat. That's disturbing the peace. Ten days in this town, isn't it? And he insulted the badge you're wearing. Currying favor, indeed! How many days for that, marshal?"

"Yeah—yeah," said the lawman. "That ought to call for at least ten more days. Twenty in all."

This sudden turn sobered Lyle. Twenty days! He couldn't stand even one. He had to find Star and make good his entry in the race. It was his only salvation.

"What kind of justice is this?" he demanded. "I only came for information about my horse."

"And tried to kill me because I couldn't tell you something which I know nothing about," charged Hart. "Take him away, marshal. I'll be right down to sign the complaint."

Lyle cursed himself for a fool. His unruly temper had worked right into Bradley's hands. He shot a glance at the lawman and at Bradley. Mel Wright was in the doorway, watching all this silently.

"Come on, Mendle," Working motioned with his gun barrel. "Let's walk down to the jail house."

Lyle shrugged his shoulders helplessly and moved toward the door. His manner was deceptive enough to throw the lawman off guard. When he was close, Lyle chopped down hard with his open hand and knocked the marshal's gun to the floor. Then he was battering Mel Wright aside as he went through the door on the run.

He could hear the shouting behind him as he hit the street. For a second, he paused, nonplussed. Tico Sanchez and the horses were gone! What had gotten into that crazy little Mexican? Lyle took off

down the alleyway between the bank and mercantile and into the gloom of oncoming night.

As he ran he could hear Hart Bradley shouting for the marshal to apprehend him. That alone was an admission of Bradley's guilt to Lyle. Otherwise Hart would scoff at such a ridiculous charge.

A shot laced the stillness and the bullet whined close. Breath sawed in and out of Lyle's lungs as he kept running to the shelter of the trees lining Powder Creek. As long as he was free, he had a chance.

CHAPTER TWO

The Big Stampede

WHEN Lyle Mendle reached the bosque of Powder Creek, he stopped. His chest heaved with exertion. Behind him he could hear Hart Bradley shouting and now other voices were added to his. But Lyle had misled them in the gloom that was even now giving the protection of full night.

He turned along the line of cottonwoods and made his way in behind Wally's blacksmith shop. Skirting the rear, he came to the edge of the main street. Directly across from him, on this edge of town, stood Sharon Winters' house. The lamp was lit in the living room.

Along the boardwalks, windows were throwing their yellow rectangles of light and a lone rider loped through the dust toward the Rincon House. Three blocks down a huddle of men were before the O.K. Saloon. That would be the marshal organizing a searching party for him. If only Tico had not ran out. The little Mexican knew no fear. Had he seen something?

Lyle crouched low and ran across the street and into the shadows of Sharon's house. He waited a long moment, watching that group down the street. Seeing they had not yet broken their huddle, he took the steps lightly and rapped on the door, then stepped quickly back into the deep shadows.

Light steps sounded from within and the front door opened, throwing the lighted brilliance of the house across the porch and down the steps. Sharon stood framed in the light.

"Close it quick," said Lyle softly.

Sharon stepped out and pulled the door closed, saying incredulously, "Lyle! Where are you?"

"Over here by the bushes."

Sharon moved down the steps to his side, her head tilted to read his expression. "I heard a shot," she said. "Was it for you? You're all right?"

"The marshal's getting old," said Lyle grimly. "Can you get me a horse without arousing everyone?"

"Tico and your horse?" countered Sharon.

"Tico beat it for some reason," grunted Lyle, perplexed. "Can you get me a horse?"

"What kind of trouble are you in now?" There was petulance in her voice.

"I roughed Hart up a bit," said Lyle flatly, "and he wanted the marshal to throw me in jail ten days for disturbing the peace. To me that means he stole Star. He'd have had me lock stock and barrel then."

Sharon said gravely, "That's a strong accusation—horse stealing."

Lyle was silent for a moment, studying her in the darkness. He could not see the expression on her face but he could tell by the tone of her voice she did not wholly agree with him.

"There's something fishy somewhere," he said finally, with a touch of anger. "Hart's pretty smart. He hires things done. Never plays in the open. He even figured I'd make a rash move. Well, I did, but he hasn't got me salted like he planned. He'll try something else."

"I don't believe—"

"Whose side you on?" cried Lyle.

"Don't be silly," interrupted Sharon. 'What do you plan to do now?"

"Head down the Flying Horse Ridges to Del Porto and see if I can cut sign of Diablo Star or Tico Sanchez. Tico didn't leave me without a good reason. If I don't cut either one—I'm going into Del Porto and show myself around. That should draw lightnin'—from the one most interested in having me out of the way. Hart's working the angles, all right, but I've an idea of what he intends to do."

"And that is?" asked Sharon pointedly.

"I haven't figured it all yet," said Lyle. "Don't you realize what it means to win the breeding championship of New Mexico? I'll not only save all I've worked for, but my stock will be worth something. Don't you realize?"

SHARON put her hand on Lyle's arm. "Is it worth exposing yourself to this danger?"

Lyle sighed deeply. "Would you care a great deal?" he asked softly.

"What do you think?" she countered.

He pulled her close to him and kissed her roughly. She was stiff in his arms, seemingly reluctant to let herself go. Laughing, she pushed him away and said chidingly, "I'm the one in danger now."

"Did you mind?" he said huskily.

"It was rather nice—though rough."

"I'll find my horse," swore Lyle fervently. "He'll win so I can clear the ranch for us."

"I've always loved the place," murmured Sharon.

"Then get me that horse, now," said Lyle.

"Wait here."

Then she was gone in the darkness, making her way around the side of the house. Lyle looked down the street. The group before the saloon was breaking up. Nervously, Lyle rubbed his hands together

Sharon returned and handed the reins of the horse to him "He's sound," she said.

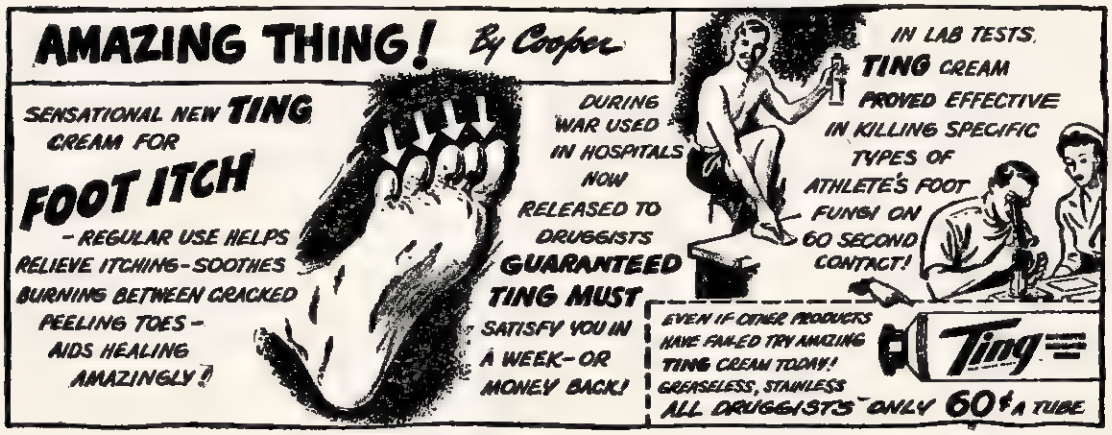
"I'd know Blaze at the bottom of a black pit," said Lyle. "I'll see you in Del Porto on race day."

"Be careful," she warned.

"I'll be careful," he said darkly and swung into the saddle. Then he leaned down and brushed her cheek with his lips, murmuring: "Be seeing you!" Then he gigged his horse onto the street.

As he hit the open, someone shouted, "Hey, you, wait a minute!" When Lyle didn't stop, the man laced a shot down the street at him.

But Lyle was free, the wind singing in his ears. He sat straight and tall in the saddle, a part of the animal as he rocketed along through the night. Once he had crossed Powder Creek, he pulled Blaze in, saying soothingly, "Easy does it, fella. We have a long way to go."


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
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Ting
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE

FOUR days of searching the Flying Horse Ridges revealed no trace of Diablo or Tico Sanchez. Several times Lyle talked with prospectors and mountain men. Tight-mouthed as they were, Lyle could tell they had no information of what he sought. His puzzlement deepened.

And this day, Thursday, with the sun directly overhead, he sat Blaze looking down the slope at Del Porto. Unshaven, with the dust of the trail powdering his shirt and levis, only his height in the saddle revealed that he was Lyle Mendle.

Below him the town was already taking on its yearly festive mood. Gaudy banners hung on wire across the ribbon of dust that was the main street. The arena at the far edge of the scatteration of buildings and houses looked like a circle of bleached bones from its new coat of white wash. The wagons of early arrivals were lined along the trees and the small fires of the early-comers made thin spirals in the day's noon heat.

Lyle put Blaze down the slope and entered the town. The limply hanging banners displayed:

DEL PORTO STAMPEDE

TWO DAYS OF FUN AND FROLIC

Either side of those banners hung American flags. Red and White bars with forty-six stars in the field of blue.

The boardwalks were busy with women dressed in freshly laundered gingham gowns. Men clumped along, their spurs let out to the festive notch. A tinny piano spilled its notes from the Flying Horse Saloon as the batwings sawed constantly. The Stampede was still two days away but the people were getting at it early.

Lyle walked his mount down the center of the street, watching the false fronts. He saw the small puncher sitting here by the horse trough before the mercantile store and was conscious of the man's close scrutiny. Lyle reined in at the Del Porto Hotel hitch rack and lit stiffly down.

He made the reins secure to the rail and ducked under onto the boardwalk. Just as he entered the hotel lobby, he shot a quick backward glance over his shoulder and caught the little man off guard. The man dropped his eyes and stared down at his boots. Lyle's eyes were cold as steel as he crossed the lobby to the desk.

He was looking down in deep study when he took the pen and registered as Lyle Mendle, Rincon, and looked up only when a girl's throaty voice said, "Room Nine. Up the stairs and to the far end of the hall. It's a corner room with a view of the street."

Her hair was red. Not flaming red, but bordering on a coppery color. It was the kind that lamp shine would turn to golden threads. Her oval face at first glance was not too attractive. The eyebrows were too thick, the nose too pugged, the lips too full. Lyle found himself oddly comparing this girl with Sharon Winters. And the more he studied her the more attractive she became. The tight-fitting gingham dress she wore did much to accentuate her lithe, full-bosomed form.

"Thank you," he said and picked up the key.

Lyle turned from the desk and went up the stairs. When he got to the place on the steps where the lobby ceiling would hide her from view, he looked down at her. The register was turned toward her and it was obvious she had read his name. She was looking up at him, her full lips slightly parted, revealing strong, white teeth, but her brown eyes were narrowed to hide all expression. Lyle went down the hall to his room.

THERE WAS the smell of living in here. The faded rose wall paper and the calendar there on the wall with an Indian cross-legged before his teepee smoking his long pipe was typical of cow-

town hotels. He went to the window and looked down on the street.

The little man was no longer there by the horse trough. Lyle pondered that for a moment, then turned to the bed. After testing it, he took off his boots and stretched out. In a moment, he was deep asleep.

The room was shrouded in gloom when he awoke. The bed creaked under his weight as he rose and went to the window. Below him the street was almost deserted. It was the supper hour. The dust kicked up by a passing horseman hung like golden flecks in the light thrown from the store and saloon windows.

Lyle pulled down the shade and lit the lamp. Using the pitcher of water, he shaved and made his toilet. He succeeded in beating most of the dust from his levis and shirt. When he was done, he slicked back his hair and donned his hat. He let himself from the room and locked the door.

In the lobby, he was pleased to see the girl was still behind the desk. "If," he said, grinning, "you should have your back turned and I wanted my key, what name would I use?"

She smiled, but it was a bit forced and said, "Rojean."

Lyle nodded and put his key on the desk. "Where's a good eating place?"

"Whitey's."

He touched his hat and turned from the lobby. Pausing by the canopy upright there on the boardwalk, he looked up and down the street. He spotted Whitey's sign diagonally across the street. That piano down at the Flying Horse still threw its tinny tunes into the street.

A man came up the boardwalk, half drunk, head down, mumbling to himself. Horses stood hock-sprung at the hitch racks, drowsing in the evening's softness. Overhead the stars were glittering down.

Lyle went to his mount and swung into the saddle. He reined him around and trotted down the street to the livery stable. At its entrance, he turned the animal over to the gimpy hostler with a terse, "Grain 'im heavy," and stepped onto the boardwalk and went down toward Whitey's.

As he passed the Del Porto Hotel on the opposite side of the street, he saw the little man of the horse trough come rapidly from the lobby and cross to the Flying Horse Saloon. Lyle had the impulse to follow him, but conquered it. If that was more than coincidence he meant to let the play take its course. He turned into Whitey's.

His meal finished, Lyle returned to the street. Townspeople and visitors for the Stampede were on the move again, a surging tide between the Flying Horse and the Lucky Clover Casino. A group of horsemen loped into town and curbed at the Lucky Clover. They all swung down and clomped inside.

Lyle stood in the shadows on the boardwalk, the crowd surging about him, as he debated his moves. Under the clock, Diablo Star had proven he could win the Del Porto race and the accompanying breeder's championship. That meant more than just winning. Knowing Hart Bradley's vanity such as he did, Lyle figured Hart was set on racing Star himself.

That meant Lyle had to draw the others into the open by being seen around town. He decided that tomorrow would be time enough to show himself. He held the pat hand. He was checking into them. But what had happened to Tico Sanchez, his ranch hand and jockey? It wasn't like Tico not to find him.

Lyle crossed the street and entered the lobby.

The girl's back was to him as he came up to the desk. "My key, Rojean," he said.

Rojean was a long time in turning and when she did, that quick smile was missing. With careful deliberation, she reached onto the board and handed him the key to number Eight.

"That's not—" Lyle began and her tight expression stopped him. She raised her eyes ceilingward and as quickly lowered them.

Every muscle in Lyle's body went rigid. The game had already opened and the pot was boiling over.

"Thanks," he murmured. "Thanks." Picking up the Eight key, he turned and went heavily up the stairs. Where his view of her would have been cut off, he looked back.

Rojean was staring up at him, her eyes clouded with fear. She was mutely asking him not to go on.

Lyle continued up the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

The Return of Tico

LYLE did not pause in the dimly lit hallway, but slogged down to Eight and let himself in. This room was the same as the other. Iron bed, the same faded rose wallpaper pattern. The only difference was the lithograph, the picture of a cowboy bucking his horse through an early morning chuckwagon breakfast.

With the lamp lit, he made the usual noise of a man preparing for bed. Then he stretched out fully clothed after turning off the light. He rolled restlessly around and wound up close to the wall separating him from room Nine. Then he became quite still.

Long moment dragged away, then he heard the creaking of the bed in Nine and a muted voice: "Guy next door. Mendle must be touring the town."

Another voice, nasal in quality, also muted: "He'll get nailed if he steps into the Flying Horse."

"What if they got him already? We could spend the whole night here. Sashay down and see. Pass the pint."

"Empty."

The voice swore. "Go down. He won't know you're coming from this room even if you pass him on the stairs. If you did we'd have him from both directions. And get another pint."

"I'm thirsty, all right."

"Me, too. Go ahead."

"Be right back."

Lyle rolled silently from the bed and shucked his boots. Then he was at the door, even as he heard Nine's open cautiously. Lyle twisted the knob of his own and held it ready. When he judged the man was opposite it, he jerked it open and reached out, stepping into the hall.

The little man of the horse trough grunted in surprise and spun with a sharp punch to Lyle's stomach. He might as well have been smashing at an oak plank. Lyle chopped down with a clubbing blow, but it glanced from the man's head to his shoulder. It was then Lyle realized he had caught himself a small bundle of dynamite.

The little man was all over him, attacking silently, the breath whistling from between clenched teeth. He kicked and punched all at once.

Lyle grabbed him again and threw him hard against the hall wall. He had him in his hands, turning him from the wall carom when Nine opened and the puncher left behind stepped into the hallway with drawn gun. Lyle threw the little man at him even as his gun barked.

The small man screamed and lit limply on the carpeted hallway floor. Then Lyle's gun was out and beating that second shot by a split second. The spindly puncher gaped at Lyle with open mouth, then sagged down over the inert small man. There were footsteps beating on the stairs now. Lyle swore. He had only wanted information. Now two men lay dead in the hallway.

The portly man leading the pack up the stairs was gesturing wildly and shouting in a strange tongue. Others crammed the hallway behind him, staring curiously

down at the dead men lying on the floor.

"Get Marshal Shebley," shouted the roly-poly man.

There was the sound of flying boots on the stairs as someone turned to obey. Then a girl's voice was saying, "Let me through, please! Let me through. Papa!"

THE CROWD parted to let Rojean pass. She stopped beside her father, seeing the men there on the floor. A tight gasp escaped her and she looked up at Lyle, the fear still in her eyes.

"They were laying for me," he said flatly. "You knew that."

Rojean's father looked at her sharply and said something in that strange tongue.

Rojean nodded. "I knew," she answered hollowly, "but I didn't think it would come to this. I gave Mr. Mendle the key to Eight so he wouldn't run into them. I thought he would take the tip and stay in there."

Again her father said something sharp in that foreign tongue.

"As excitable as you are?" said Rojean. "You'd have run into the middle of it. This man is big enough to take care of himself." Then she looked fully at Lyle again.

Lyle's face colored a little and he mumbled, "I'm mighty grateful for that tip. I didn't want it to turn out this way, either."

Then a booming voice was shouting, "Clear the way! The Law's comin' through!"

Men flattened against the wall as Marshal Bill Shebley made his way to the front. He looked down at the two men huddled there on the floor and said, "Mark Autro and Breezy Carse. Now what in the hell?" He turned to Lyle and asked bluntly: "Who are you?"

"Lyle Mendle from Rincon."

The big lawman studied Lyle for a moment, then said, "What's your story?"

Rojean started to say something.

"I said *his* story," broke in the marshal.

"I won't have killin' here," put in Rojean's father excitedly.

"Shut up!" thundered the lawman. "Go ahead, Mendle, and make it good."

Lyle told the story simply from the time Rojean handed him the key and gave him the tip with her eyes. He repeated the conversation he had heard through the wall and finished with: "Maybe I forced the going a little, Marshal, but I got to thinking it was unkindly to strangers, their taking over my room thataway."

"And maybe," said the lawman sharply, "you wanted to wring some information out of little Breezy. Just what *did* you want to know, mister?"

"Why," answered Lyle blandly, "I wanted to know why they were hiding in my room to gun me down."

Twin spots of color leaped into Shebley's cheeks, but he held his tongue. He turned to Rojean and asked, "Is it true what this hombre says about the key?"

"Yes," admitted Rojean, with seeming reluctance. "I don't know where they got the key, but I knew they were going to Nine."

"How did you know?"

"Intuition," murmured Rojean cryptically. "I didn't tell Papa. You know how excitable he is."

The lawman fixed a glowering glance on Rojean's father, then turned to the group along the hall. "All right, some of you boys," he barked. "Lend a hand here. Get these boys down to Doc Raft's. And you—" he pointed a blunt finger at Lyle. "I don't know what you're up to, but I don't want you pulling that iron on everyone who might look cockeyed at you. I run a peaceful town."

"Marshal," said Lyle, "I'll be as peaceful as people will let me be."

THE lawman grunted and then supervised the removal of the bodies, following the group down the stairs. Rojean's

father went to the railing to look after them.

Lyle said, "You know more about this than meets the eye. Let's hear some of it, sister."

Rojean's hands went to her throat as if in protection from his coldness. That fear was back in her brown eyes. Before she could speak, her father called from the head of the stairs:

"Rojean! Come complete your books. I send you home right away for being a bad girl."

She continued staring up at Lyle for a second longer and her fear-filled expression changed to one of helplessness. Then she murmured, "Be careful," and walked rapidly down the hall to join her father and go down the stairs with him. Her father jabbered at her in his strange tongue.

Lyle stood in the hallway debating with himself. The game was wide open now, his theory working out. If he could have only made that little man talk. Both of them were obviously town bums willing to do a stronger man's bidding. But whose? Hart Bradley's? If he knew Hart, the banker would have someone else running the job for him. And Rojean. She had had no qualms about warning him, even helping him out of this jam. But there was something. . . . Lyle had the feeling that the missing Tico Sanchez could supply a few links in this chain. But where was Tico Sanchez?

Then a sudden thought hit him. Her father was going to send Rojean home. That meant she did not stay in the hotel. If he intercepted her, he'd wring the truth out of her if he had to twist her pretty little neck.

He pulled his boots back on and went to the end of the hallway and down the back stairs. The raucous sounds of the festive town beat into this alley. Going to the edge of the hotel building, he went up the narrow space between the buildings and took up a stance just off the boardwalk. Here he could command a view of anyone entering or leaving the hotel lobby.

Lyle did not have long to wait. Rojean came from the lobby and turned down the street, a three-cornered shawl snugged tightly about her shoulders. He stepped onto the boardwalk and followed, unnoticed in the surge of the festive-minded people.

Near the edge of town, Lyle stepped into a causeway between the harness and blacksmith shops and ran to the alley. As the buildings grew more sparse, he could keep her in sight. When he saw her angle across the road that turned from the main street, he sprinted ahead of her and pulled up in the shadows of a huge, live oak tree.

When she was abreast of him, Lyle stepped out saying softly, "Rojean, it's Lyle. I want to talk."

She whirled, frightened, then turned and ran. Lyle sprinted after her. He reached out and grabbed the shawl. She let it go and continued running. Holding to the shawl, he picked up speed and caught her by the arm.

"Oh!" she cried chokingly and clawed at him with her free hand.

Lyle got that hand imprisoned and took two resounding kicks on the shin. "Play tiger," he gritted and grabbed her about the waist, lifting her as he would a sack of grain, carrying her kicking and squirming back to the deep shadows of the oak tree. If someone were to come along this road, he did not want interference until he had the information he was after.

HE PUT her down and imprisoned her against the tree trunk by using the shawl about her neck. He bent back to keep from being kicked again.

"Calm down, tiger," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "What's brought on this rush of unfriendliness? One minute you save my life, the next you try to peel

the hide off me. What gives, anyway?"

"Let me go!" she demanded stormily.

"Relax," said Lyle drily. "You won't get hurt unless you want to play rough and silent."

Held as she was, Rojean ceased her struggling and stared at Lyle, her eyes round and frightened.

"Come on now," he coaxed. "Just tell me what you know about all this."

"Please," she begged. "I know nothing."

"Then give with the intuition," said Lyle sardonically. "You were afraid to tell your father about the men in my room, but you weren't afraid to tip me. You stood up for me when the law came. Why be afraid now?"

"I—I—" stammered Rojean, her voice quavering. "I couldn't tell you if you were to kill me. Just leave town, Lyle. Get out—they'll never let you see that race. That's all I can say." And she began to sob, the deep sobbing of a woman sorely troubled.

"Now, now," muttered Lyle, nonplussed. This was his first experience with tears from a woman and he did not quite know what to do. She was crying as if her heart were at the breaking point. He loosened his grip on her. Then he was taking her in his arms, kissing her tear-wet lips.

For a moment, she was limp in his arms. Then her wracking slowly subsided and she was pressing against him, clinging to him, her lips tight against his.

Lyle pulled her closer. He didn't know quite what he was doing. He had never known such warmth, such wildness. Surging blood threatened his senses. Every fiber of his body tingled. And with his racing thoughts he made a comparison between this girl and Sharon Winters. There wasn't any. Sharon was a marble statue compared to this girl. But with this thought came a sense of guilt. He had no right to another's charms. He released her, stepping back.

For a long moment, they stood looking at each other. Then Rojean spoke slowly, "I'm sorry, Lyle. I didn't mean to show my—Believe me when I say I can't tell you more. Just leave before the Stampede officially opens. A hotel lobby is a good place to hear gossip and plans. Please go."

"What plans?" he asked sharply.

"Go," she pleaded. "Hasn't tonight told you enough?"

He took her and shook her roughly by the shoulders. "Tell me," he begged. "Just name a name. I can't run, Rojean."

She hung her head and the tears started again. "I've told you all I can," she murmured tremulously. "God knows, I've told you all I can."

Then she was turning away from him, walking slowly toward her home. She pulled the shawl tightly about her shoulders, shoulders that were once again wracked with sobs.

Lyle looked after her with mingled emotions. He had the urge to catch her again and draw her into his arms, comforting her. But he conquered his impulse. She had shown him what she thought of him with that kiss. Why, then, didn't she tell him what she knew?

"Señor Lyle!"

Lyle spun, jarred from his bitter thoughts. "Tico!" he swore. "Where have you been, you Mexican heathen?"

Little Tico came from the deep shadows to stand spraddle-legged before Lyle.

"Very close, Señor," he said matter-of-factly. "I see you chase this girl from town and I but waited until the love-making was over."

CHAPTER FOUR

Powdersmoke Sweepstakes

LYLE studied the little weather-beaten Mexican there in the gloom for a long moment. "You ran out on me when I needed you most," he charged.

"Valgame!" swore Tico. "This is not so, Señor. I see this man run from the rear of the bank as you go in. I think he knows about Diablo Star, no? I followed him."

"Then you know where the horse is?"

"No, Señor. But he is close by, of that I am sure. This hombre, Dirk McFee, has a horse entered by the name of Satan. But I have watched him close. I see him with no horse."

Lyle let the silence run, deep in thought. Dirk McFee. Lyle had never heard of him as a breeder of horses. And leaving the bank. That tied Hart Bradley in. But how to flush them into the open? He fished some money from his pocket and handed it to Tico. Quickly, he told him about the shooting in the hotel and Tico swore luridly.

"Now," said Lyle. "First go to the race judges. They'll still be around tonight. Apply for our entry numbers. I mailed the entry three weeks ago. Don't let anyone see those numbers. Then make the rounds of the saloons and spread the word to all who'll listen that Lyle Mendle got scared from the hotel ruckus and left town. Be sure Dirk McFee hears you. Run me down plenty. Lay it on thick that I'm a coward and you want no part of me for running. That you're now out of a riding job on Diablo Star, whose entry has been scratched.

"That should get you the job of jockey on this Satan who is Star or I miss my guess. Everyone knows you are the only one who can give him a good ride. Soon as you're set, come up the back steps of the Del Porto Hotel and to number Eight. I still have the key. I'll be hiding there."

"This going from saloon to saloon, I like," said Tico gravely. "But this making you out a coward, Señor—"

"I have my reasons," snapped Lyle. "And make it sound convincing. Get back to me as soon as you can."

Tico shrugged characteristically. "Si, Señor," he muttered and moved off through the darkness.

Lyle crossed the road and ducked in behind the buildings. He went down the alley to the rear of the hotel and up the stairs to Eight. Inside, he locked the door and left the key twisted in the lock. Without lighting the lamp, he went to the window and looked down on the street. The pre-stampede crowds still continued their restless surgings. He stood there until he saw little Tico make his weaving way across the street from the Lucky Clover to the Flying Horse. The gnome-like Mexican was packing quite a load already. Lyle turned from the window then and went to bed. He fell into a fitful sleep.

Lyle remained in the room and sweated Friday out. Night came and still no Tico. Saturday. No Tico. He was pacing the room restlessly now. Watching from the window, he saw Rojean leave the lobby once and cross the street to the mercantile store. She came out with a package and recrossed to the hotel.

FOR a long time after seeing her, Lyle's thoughts tumbled around in his head. He could feel the warmth of her pressed against him as vibrantly as if she were here in this very room. He could taste the wild flavor of her lips. The feeling was very disturbing and he tried to throw it off, but he could not. He forced himself to think of Sharon Winters. And again that sense of guilt assailed him. He had no right to Rojean's charm.

When the streets were clear of people and the rodeo was well under way, Lyle stole down the back steps and into the Lucky Clover. He bought a shot of whiskey and helped himself to the free lunch. He was famished from his vigil, but the lone bartender paid him no heed. He dozed at the far end of the bar wishing he was at the rodeo. Lyle slipped out and returned to his room unseen.

It was nearing nine o'clock when Tico

rapped on the door. Lyle let him in and relocked it.

"Where have you been?" he asked harshly.

Tico put his hands to his head. "Señor," he said, "I got one big head from spreading the news about you. Dirk McFee bought me many tequillas and was very pleased to hear. I have been sleeping, Señor."

"All right," snapped Lyle. "How about riding?"

"I ride," said Tico. "McFee moved Satan in this evening. It is Diablo Star, Señor."

"Good!" enthused Lyle. His mind was working rapidly now. Their feeling of security was flushing them into the open. He rubbed his hands together, fretting against this inaction. He said, "Keep moving around town, Tico. All you know is that you ride a horse called Satan tomorrow. McFee knows you know it is Diablo Star, but as long as you say nothing, he'll believe you're on his side. If my name is mentioned, continue to say the same things about me."

"I should not speak of a dog that way," said Tico.

"This is for a purpose," said Lyle. "You got the numbers?"

"Si," and Tico fished them from his back pocket. Two number Threes.

Lyle took them, saying soberly, "Just remember one thing. It means everything in the world to me tomorrow—and to you."

"Si," nodded Tico solemnly. "You can lose your ranch, and I lose my job."

"And maybe," said Lyle darkly, "our lives."

Tico looked his long way up at Lyle and his dark eyes were narrowed. "Our lives are little," he murmured philosophically.

Lyle reached out his hand and Tico took it. Then he turned to the door and Lyle let him out. He heard the little man go quietly down the back steps. In this moment, Lyle realized, that for all his size, there went a man.

He fretted through the evening and Sunday morning. When the first crowds began surging toward the arena, Lyle let himself from the room and went down the back steps. Keeping to the alley, he paralleled the main street. Then he was in behind the stalls, mingling with the people who had come to see the horses entered in the feature race, the Del Porto Breeder's Championship.

Lyle stayed away from the barn, comforted by the weight of his .45 strapped to his leg. Preliminary races were on and the spectators looking at the feature entries ignored the lone cowboy leaning there against the barn.

THEN came the announcement from the arena: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the feature race of the day, Del Porto's Breeder's Championship. This is to establish the fastest quarter horse and finest breeder in New Mexico. They will be at the barrier within five minutes. The horses are being saddled now."

Lyle moved swiftly into the barn. A huge dark man stood in front of stall Three intent on the activity inside. That would be Dirk McFee. Lyle came up behind him and jammed his pistol into the man's back.

"Don't even change expression," he murmured harshly as the man's muscles bunched against the pistol barrel. "Move into the stall."

Without glancing over his shoulder, Dirk moved into the stall, saying heavily, "Think this'll get you somewhere, Mendle?"

Two men were pulling the cinches tight on Diablo Star. The horse looked sleek and ready. Tico Sanchez, resplendent in his red silk shirt, leaned against the stall wall. When he saw Lyle he let his tension out with a sigh. The two wranglers

paused at their work, their eyes widening.

"One move from any of you," snapped Lyle, "and I break McFee in two with a slug through the back. A tactic I'm sure he understands. Tico, here." He fished in his back pocket and brought out the numbers. "Change Satan back to Diablo Star."

Tico leaped to obey. He took the numbers from Lyle and ripped the Six from either side of the saddle and replaced them with the Threes.

Dirk McFee said heavily again, "You'll never do it, Mendle."

Lyle kept the gun pressure in the man's back. "It's done," he said. Then to Tico: "When that bugle goes, take him out."

The short, wiry wrangler said, "Boss."

"Shut up!" cracked McFee. "Just hold tight."

The arena bugle sounded, calling the horses to post. Tico completed the cinching, crooning to the fretting Diablo Star. When he was ready, Lyle ordered one of the wranglers, "Help him up."

The two men remained stubbornly against the stall wall. Lyle increased the pressure of his pistol in McFee's back. "The man says help him up," said McFee.

The small wrangler put out his hands and Tico vaulted into the saddle. The horse curvetted nervously. The wrangler tried to take advantage of that to get to Lyle but Tico clipped him smartly across the face with his quirt and sent him reeling back against the wall.

"Give him a ride," said Lyle grimly.

"He'll run," said Tico and reined the horse from the stall into position in the parade to the barrier.

The roar of the crowd beat into the stall as the horses reached the track and began their prancing past the grandstand. The announcer's voice came clearly:

"The cream of New Mexican quarter horse breeding. In Number One position, Big Gray. Two, Texas Babe. Three—" There was a pause. "Three, Diablo Star. Four, Prince Paul. Five, Rio Bill. Six—" Another pause. "Scratch Number Six, Satan. Seven, Gila Cross."

Lyle released his gun pressure against McFee and moved back to the stall door. McFee turned and bent his glowering eyes on Lyle.

Lyle said, "We can hear the race from here. Relax, unless you want to go for that shoulder hideout."

A grin spread Dirk's thick lips. "I've never been foolish enough to go against the drop, Mendle. Enjoy the race."

Lyle grinned back, but there was a touch of malicious satisfaction in it. "I will."

The announcement came: "The horses have reached the barrier. In a moment Del Porto will salute the new breeding champion of New Mexico."

The arena was still, hushed now.

Despite the drama in the stall, all four men listened intently.

SUDDENLY, Lyle saw Dirk McFee's eyes shift. His grin widened. "I don't fool that easy," said Lyle.

Then he felt the gun jab into his ribs. A voice cracked out, "Drop the iron, Mendle!"

Lyle let his gun fall to the stall straw and slowly turned. Hart Bradley held that gun to his ribs, his handsome, aquiline face screwed into a scowl. He directed his clipped words at McFee:

"So you had to go and muff it. I thought you were sure you'd scared him off after fouling up the killing at the hotel."

Dirk McFee hunched his big shoulders. "That little Mexican, Sanchez, double-crossed me."

Bradley swore harshly. "I should have done it myself." He eared the hammer of his weapon.

"Easy, Boss," broke in McFee. "What do you care if Star wins or loses? We'll take bucko-boy here now and where we'll

take him. He'll never get back. Isn't it all over town that he ran? Nobody'll miss 'im. You get the ranch and everything, and we're all in the clear. How's that for a deal?"

Hart eased his trigger finger. "You're right," he grinned. "See you do the job this time."

McFee started forward, flanked by his grinning wranglers. "It'll be a pleasure," he said.

The announcer's voice broke in: "They're off! Diablo Star stumbled at the start. It's Big Gray, Texas Babe and Gila Cross neck and neck going into the first turn. Rio Bill, Prince Paul and Diablo Star in that order."

The men in the stall became still-held as the announcer droned on: "Into the second turn—it's Texas Babe and Gila Cross, and here comes Diablo Star on the outside!"

The crowd roar swelled.

"Star," breathed Lyle fervently. "Come on Star."

"Root him home," grinned Hart Bradley evilly. "It'll do you a hell of a lot of good."

The announcer's voice rose with excitement: "Into the stretch—it's Texas Babe and Diablo Star. Diablo Star and Texas Babe. Texas Babe. It's still Texas Babe."

Lyle dove for his gun there in the straw. Dirk McFee grunted a curse and kicked out at him even as he drew his shoulder hideout. Hart Bradley's gun spoke and Lyle felt a searing hot streak across his back. The two wranglers leaped forward and Lyle tripped them with his legs, bouncing them into McFee, spoiling his aim. The bullet thudded into the stall wall. Lyle found his gun, but his fingers closed over the barrel instead of aiming it.

Marshal Bill Shebley's deep voice boomed out, "What goes on here?" He whipped Hart Bradley over the head with the barrel of his weapon before Hart could get off another shot. Bradley went down limply collapsing hard in the stall aisle.

Lyle flipped his weapon and caught it by the butt. Dirk McFee was dancing around trying to get in a shot and keep from hitting one of his thrashing wranglers. Lyle wormed himself free and pulled the trigger even as McFee shot. Another slug smashed him in the shoulder, pinning him to the straw. Dirk took an awkward step and pitched forward full length.

"Damn!"

Then Marshal Shebley grabbed the two wranglers like jackstraws and flung them up against the stall wall. "Hold it there," he barked.

Lyle raised himself to one elbow as Rojean rushed to his side and bent down over him.

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JAYNE'S P-W for PIN-WORMS

"You're hurt!" she cried.

Then another feminine voice was crying out, "Hart! Hart, what's happened to you?"

Sharon Winters ran up and bent down over the prone banker. From where Lyle lay he could see the genuine concern on her face. He glanced at Rojean and saw her turn her head away as tears sprang into her eyes.

SHARON straightened and she looked into the stall. Her eyes widened on Lyle and Rojean. Her hands went to her throat and a tight, "Oh!" escaped her lips. Then she came to Lyle's side and knelt down.

"You're hurt," she said.

Lyle looked at her levelly. "Not as much as you think," he answered coldly. "When you play both ends against the middle like this you'll get burned, Sharon. Help Hart, he needs you more than I do."

She stared at him. "Lyle, I don't know what to—"

"Would you bind this shoulder, Rojean?" asked Lyle softly.

Sharon straightened, tears coming to her eyes. Slowly, she turned and left the stall. Nor did she stop beside Hart Bradley, who even now was beginning to stir. Head hanging, shoulders wracking, she kept on down the stall aisle. She had played both ends, and now she knew she had lost.

As Rojean bound the wound, Lyle said, "You could have told me and maybe saved all this."

When she had stopped the flow of blood, she hung her head. "You can hate me if you wish," she said, and her voice trembled. "But the reason I couldn't tell you was because it involved—my father and your girl."

"What?" he barked.

"Hart Bradley owns our hotel," said Rojean quaveringly. "My father is just an immigrant. He held the threat of foreclosure over papa's head to do what he demanded. It was papa who gave the Nine key to Mark and Breezy. I had to lie for him. And Sharon Winters was the one who came down to tip Dirk off that you were heading this way and to be on the lookout. I didn't want to hurt you or my father, Lyle."

"You want I should hold these three for horse stealing, Mendle?" boomed out Marshal Shebley.

"Take 'em away," said Lyle. "I'll be down to sign the complaint."

Shebley prodded Bradley and the wranglers off at gun point.

"Who won the race?" asked Lyle. "Was it Diablo Star?"

"Listen," said Rojean, her eyes shining now.

The announcer kept insisting, "Won't Mr. Mendle of Rincon come to the judges' stand please, and accept his championship. A beautiful horse, Sir. That we can all agree. Mr. Lyle Mendle. Mr. Mendle, please!"

"Coming!" shouted Lyle. Then: "Come on, Rojean." And he took her gently by the arm.

"You've got to see a doctor quick," she said.

"That can wait." He hurried her along the stall aisle. "What's your last name anyway?"

"Rejowsky," she said shyly.

"I just wanted to know the name I was going to try and turn into mine," he grinned. And at the insistency of the announcer's voice, he shouted again: "Coming!"

A roar welled from the crowd, a tribute to him.

And he could see Tico Sanchez there in the winner's circle still astride Diablo Star, and the little Mexican's face was warped in a broad smile.

THE END

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

MATT SHERWOOD

Matt Sherwood of Windsor, Colorado, was a simple, God-fearing man. He ran his small ranch frugally. Attended church regularly. Was a devoted husband and a good father. Matt would take an occasional drink and chew the fat at the general store. He was not unlike thousands of other men of the frontier, hard workers who were striving to build better homes.

2 Windsor desperately needed an honest lawman to rid the town of Joe Mason and his hired killers. Five dead sheriffs in five months didn't make the job very attractive. And nobody would take the star. It was then that Matt quietly announced he would be the new sheriff. He retired to the rear of the jail and started firing at tin cans. After three days of practice he was ready.

The new sheriff's first official act was to close Joe Mason's Pilot Hill Casino. Mason promptly sent three of his best gunmen to add Sheriff Sherwood to the list of the five late lawmen. Matt met them. He took careful aim, fired three times. Result: three dead outlaws. Then calmly he strode to the padlocked Casino, entered through a side door and approached Mason.

4 Mason, whose gun was famous in the West, laughed and hit for leather. He never had a chance. The sheriff shot the gun out of the gambler's hand, lifted the startled outlaw up and carried him to the outskirts of town. Windsor's crime wave was over. When a grateful delegation sought to thank Sherwood, he said he was too busy with his herd. He had already been rewarded he explained. Now his children could live in a decent community.

Battle-Call for Sheepers!

"That's close enough, Sadler. Call off your gun-hawks, or tell 'em to start it."

Thrilling Drama of a Sheep-Cow War

There's a basic, fundamental reason why cowmen and sheepers cannot work the same range together. A man named Mike Dundee once tried to flout that law. This is the dramatic story of his greatest fight, his glorious defeat—and strange victory!

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CHAPTER ONE

To Hell With Sheepman Law!

THE LITTLE FIRE had been built adroitly, so that the film of smoke from the dry sticks drifted up, invisibly, against the background of gray rock, making it hard to see.

By ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

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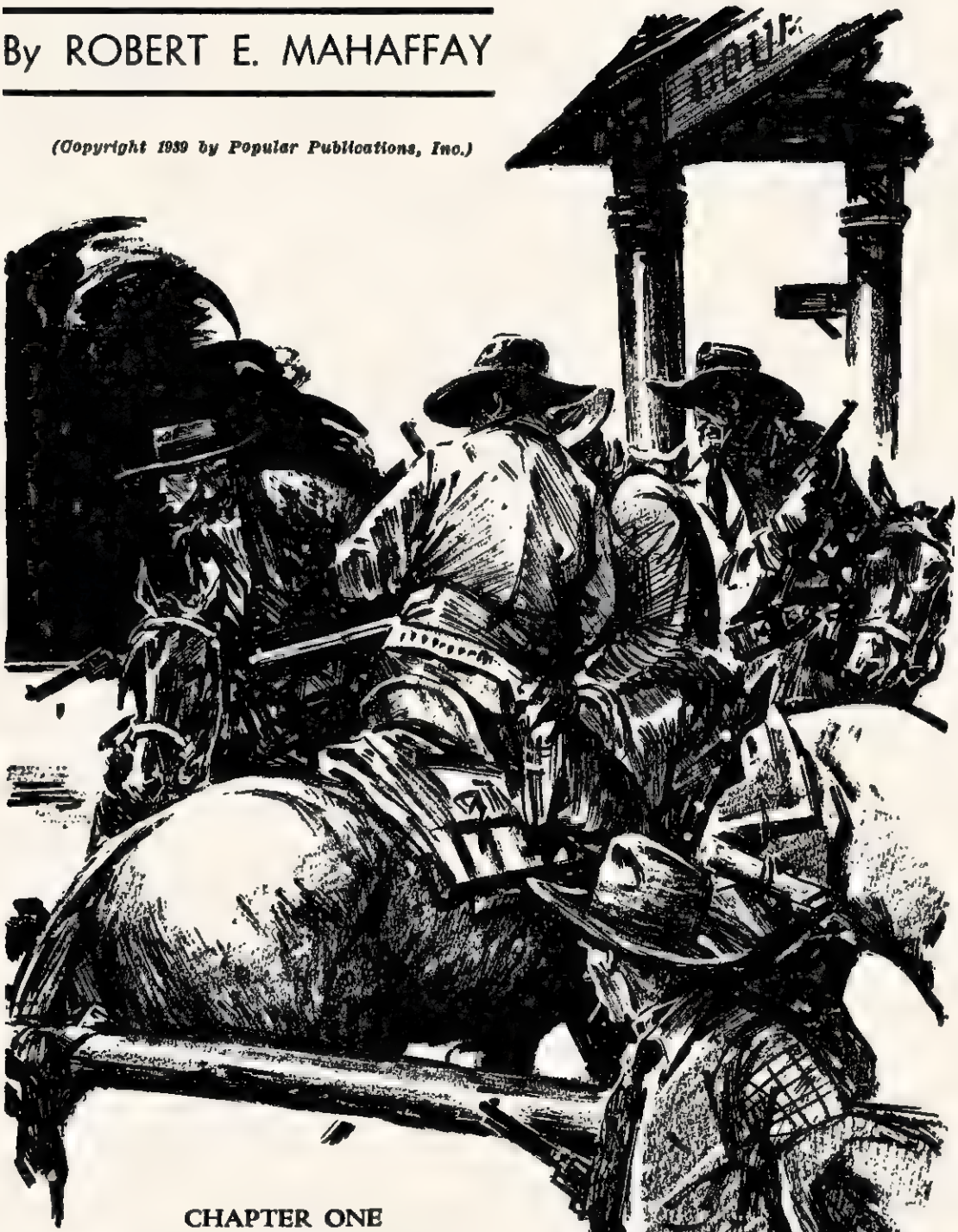


CHAPTER ONE

To Hell With Sheepman Law!

THE LITTLE FIRE had been built adroitly, so that the film of smoke from the dry sticks drifted up, invisibly, against the background of gray rock, making it hard to see.

Chris Dundee tested the warmth of the coffee pot with calloused fingers, decided it would do. "Better have some, kid, before you go down." He said it casually, as if his life didn't depend on what Mike would find down below in the town of Ridge Creek.

That was Chris's way, Mike Dundee thought: There had never been a quitting streak or a whining streak in him, and it made it that much harder. He said, "Sure. Thanks," and took the single cup, studying his brother.

Chris was twelve years older, but the twelve years looked like twenty. Like Mike's, his face had a bony strength that spoke of doggedness and firmness, but his cheeks were sunken, his brown eyes bloodshot. He was lighter by a score of pounds than he had been, thin for his size at a hundred and sixty pounds. His hair, as red as Mike's, was uncut and tangled. Chris had been on the dodge for almost three months.

The old anger surged up in Mike Dundee. The charge was murder, and the charge would stick so long as there was cattle law in the country. It was a fraudulent charge, but that wasn't going to keep Chris's neck out of a rope if they caught him. Murder. Hell, it wasn't murder to shoot into a bunch of night-riding hellions who were scattering your sheep, slaughtering them with pistol-fire.

Chris grinned. "They ain't caught me, kid. They had their last chance."

Mike Dundee said haltingly, "Chris, there's no law sayin' we got to stay. We can pull out. It ain't worth it to me, seein' you like this."

Chris Dundee chuckled. "Cripes, kid, we ain't quittin' now. There's never been a time when the Dundees wasn't raisin' sheep somewhere. All the rough weather in the world, or creek-bottom prices, or a bunch of gun-slingin' highbinders ain't kept 'em from it. Never will keep 'em from it."

"Sure, but you can't keep on givin' 'em the slip. Sooner or later—"

"Hell, kid, I won't have to. By tonight you'll be sheriffin' this layout yourself."

Mike Dundee waited a long time before he said in a low voice, "Chris, we won't win this election."

"Won't win it? You're crazy, kid. Mort Barber's been workin' his head off for you. So have lots of others. Lord, kid, you've *got* to win it!"

Mike Dundee was staring westward from the rocky ridge they were on, out across the sweeping valley that was sheep country. Maybe they had to win—but they weren't going to.

VOTES could be counted almost down to the man. The big cattle outfits which had the range staked out all the way eastward from Stony Ridge to the curving ramparts of the Skillet Mountains and south to the Yellow Sinks, would put a solid vote behind Tom Sadler. So would the businessmen of Ridge Creek.

Two weeks ago Eban Sadler, brother to Tom and joint owner of the sprawling Locked S brand, had stalked doggedly, deliberately through the town.

At each place of business his words had been the same: "Vote the way you see it. Nobody's hamperin' you. But if there's sheep stink in the sheriff's office when this is over, there won't be another dollar of cattle money spent in Ridge Creek."

Cattle money meant buttered bread instead of the dried crusts that struggling, shoe-string sheep outfits could supply. The town, too, would be solidly behind Tom Sadler.

But Chris Dundee's optimism was unshakable. "I ain't worried. You'll see, kid. You got the Sadlers plenty bothered. I was scoutin' up along the Ridge this mornin'. There was hell to pay over east—more hell-for-leather ridin' than them rannies have put out in months.

They're bothered, all right, an' it's because they know they're licked. You'll see, kid, you'll see."

Mike Dundee got up unwillingly. He couldn't bring himself to tell Chris how wrong he was. Chris was banking so desperately on Mike's winning, had convinced himself so thoroughly that it could be no other way.

He said, "Maybe I better slide down there."

"Sure you better. Want to be there when they blow the lid celebratin' for you, don't you? I'm itchin', kid, to walk into that town an' belly up for a drink with the new sheriff."

"Don't get previous about it, Chris," said Mike. "Somebody might turn loose with a gun. I'll come out an' tell you."

He left Chris by the fire, thin, haggard, worn-out, but grinning because he didn't think his kid brother could lose.

TWO HOURS later Mike Dundee was standing at the bar in the little saloon which made only a touch-and-go existence out of sheepmen's business. There was sweat on his forehead, and he couldn't believe what was taking place.

He wanted to pull out his watch and look at it again. He didn't. He felt like a fool, having checked the time thrice already during the last half hour. He took another sip of the beer he had been nursing for almost that long.

He said, "It'll be dark pretty quick. Why in hell ain't they here?"

Further along the bar, Mort Barber shifted his weight on his elbows. "It's too late for 'em now," he said. "The votin's finished."

Barber was crowding sixty. The lines of successive defeats were on his grizzled cheeks, but in his strained and bloodshot eyes now was the fierce glow of final victory.

Mike Dundee shook his head grimly. "I don't get it. Somethin's damned wrong. The Bar Crescent hasn't showed. Neither has the Flying Y. Or Sadler's outfit. Hell, their votes was enough to swing this election! Where are they?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Barber took more whiskey at a gulp. "Point is, they weren't here. Point is, you'll be the sheriff. You can square Chris, an' sheep'll get the break they got comin' on this range!"

"There'll be hell to pay." Mike Dundee gave his red head another savage shake.

Barber growled. "Let the sons sweat, I say. It ain't our job to round up votes that'll whip us."

By turning, Mike Dundee could see the flimsy frame courthouse across the street. A knot of men jammed the front steps. There was a tenseness to their waiting, an eager, half-fearful expectancy. They weren't fighters, Mike Dundee thought, but maybe they would have to be.

He could spot Jake Risling. Billy Summers, old Ellis Lovelock—sheepmen all, sheepmen who had bitten into the western slope of Stony Ridge and were hanging on by their teeth. For the past year they had had nothing but raw breaks. Another year of it would smash them.

Rays of sunlight that were nearly horizontal struck through the window against Mike Dundee's face, high-lighting his forehead and cheekbones. Concern was strong on it now. He was going to win, it looked like, but something was wrong, and the wrong kind of a win, maybe, would be worse than defeat for the men west of Stony Ridge.

The knot of men in front of the court house stirred a little, and Mort Barber pulled in a sharp breath. There was something pathetic in the old man's plaintive protest. "Gawd, won't they never git that countin' done?"

That pathetic quality in his voice reflected the tragic pathos of Mort Barber's whole life. It was years ago that he had

settled on the Stony Ridge range. A man of boundless dreams, he had visioned himself a cattle baron at the head of a vast empire.

He had had his pick of sites—to the east there was ample feed, but a shortage of water; to the west there was a slope boasting an abundance of spring water but comparatively rocky, unprofitable soil. His choice of the water and rocks had been the first of a long series of mistakes.

HE HAD bought land and bought land, mortgaging cattle and land to buy more. In the end he had spread himself too thin, and had entered into a terrific struggle to keep his holdings intact. Those dreams of grandeur had haunted him while he was being mocked, day after day, by harsh and fruitless reality.

Sheep were the answer when he had fought until he could fight no more. Sheep could forage where cattle would starve. So Mort Barger's throttled dreams had expanded again. An empire could still be built—not cattle, to be sure, but an empire. He had sold part of his land at last, sold it to sheepmen.

Thus it was Mort Barber who had ladled up a kettle of hell and spilled it over the Stony Ridge range. Mort Barber, dreamer, frustrated builder of empire, broken and bankrupt cattleman.

The Sadlers and the Flying Y and the Bar Crescent had chosen immediately to fight. They had gotten water to last them through the summers by damming a valley in the Skillet Mountains. They had heavy interests to protect against what they considered might become an invasion.

Mort Barber jumped away from the bar, spilling his whiskey. In his faded eyes was an eager, burning hope that this fight, perhaps his last one, would bring him all that he had slaved and planned for.

A man had come bursting through the figures bunched in front of the court house. He was yelling, and his voice reached across the street before it was stifled in a burst of cheers.

"It's Mike Dundee! Dundee! Dundee!"

Others came surging across the street, waving their hats, shouting. Mike Dundee slid away from the bar, but there wasn't any grin on his lean young face.

He took the hands that were thrust at him, tried to sort faces and names out of the melee. Young Billy Summers blurted, "There won't be no more sheep butchered now, by cripes!"

Tears were running down the seamed cheeks of old Ellis Lovelock. Lovelock had put his last penny into a little band of sheep, and had had half of them destroyed and his wagon burned.

Jake Risling had been a blacksmith and wheelwright before turning to sheep with the stake he had saved. "You'll likely be needin' guns to back you," he said. "Figger me in."

They believed that they were to have a chance now at honest, impartial law enforcement. They saw a chance for survival, when it had seemed that none existed.

Then through the hubbub of the jostling crowd which had stormed the saloon in celebration broke a single voice. It smashed through the other cheerful, eager tones, full of anger, full of impatience, touched with fear.

"Hold it, you damn fools! Hold it, I say!"

They let the fellow through from the door. He had been riding hard, as the dust and the sweat of his grimy face attested. He stood a good six feet, craning toward Mike Dundee, his features haggard with pent emotion.

"The Sadlers an' the rest of 'em ain't a half hour behind me," he snapped. "Must be fifty of 'em. They're gun-heavy an' lookin' for blood!"

Out of the incredulous silence a question was flung at him, and the newcomer snarled his answer.

"Somebody dynamited their dam, that's why! Ever' man-jack between Stony Ridge an' the Skillets has been up there all day, tryin' to save it!"

Mike Dundee caught him hard by the shoulder. "Did they save it?"

"They got 'er plugged an' held maybe half the water, but they're riled same as if they'd lost it all. They're blamin' us, an' aim to pay us out for it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Charge of the Cowman Brigade

THERE was an instant of staggered quiet before young Billy Summers blurted, "Cripes! Nobody here would—"

He stopped as the import of the words hit him. Somebody *had* blasted the dam, and only the sheepmen had gained by it. Their man had stepped into the law's saddle—or, rather, crawled into it, sneaked into it on an act of vicious wreckage.

The corners of Mike Dundee's mouth had whitened, an involuntary reaction he had never been able to control. "If it was one of our boys did that," he said with a sting in his voice, "we'll find him an' he'll take what he's got comin'!"

The bringer of the news broke in again. "Them Saddlers will be here mighty quick! They'll make a fight of it, or know why!"

"Let 'em try it," Mort Barber cried shrilly. "We got our rights!"

Dundee shook his head. "Not now. We don't want gun trouble. Get the word spread. Every sheepman clears out of town right now. Get back across the Ridge, or there'll be a night's work the devil wouldn't own."

"Not me," Barber piped grimly. "I'm stayin'. If them sons figger they can make me jackrabbit out of town like that—"

Dundee touched the old man's arm. "Hell, Mort, the rest of 'em feel the same way. They'd stick, only right now it'd be a fool play. The Sadlers are crazy mad, an' I don't blame 'em. We got to give 'em time to cool off. Maybe we can't walk around a fight, but we got to try."

Barber's wrinkled face screwed up in a frown. "You runnin', too?"

"I reckon," Mike Dundee said, "I can't."

His words caught. There was a bluster of talk, some recklessly militant, more of it counselling sanity. The murmurs steadied, men began to drift out. Mike Dundee stayed where he was. He saw, presently, the rigs beginning to clutter the street and then clattering off in the direction of Stony Ridge.

Those sounds died, and the street was deserted, with dusk sifting over it and the court house like gunpowder.

The barkeeper said hoarsely, "Maybe you'll be havin' a drink, Mr. Dundee?"

Mike Dundee said he wouldn't.

"I reckon, then," announced the barkeep, "I'll be shuttin' down for the time being."

He was afraid, of course, of what the cattlemen would do when they arrived. Mike Dundee drifted outside. He heard the door of the cubby-hole of a saloon being shut and barred behind him.

He remained there on the walk, his scrutiny traveling carefully up and down the lonely and darkening street. The sheepmen were gone. Dundee wondered if the cattlemen could be stopped here, or if they would follow.

Those white niches were still at the corners of Mike Dundee's mouth. In the gathering gloom he was a tall shape, poised and alert, waiting. Far off somewhere he heard all at once the rolling beat of fast-coming hoofs.

He gave it no attention for the moment, nor did that queer look leave his mouth.

He was thinking of what Chris had said:

"They're bothered, all right, an' it's because they know they're licked. You'll see, kid, you'll see."

He saw now. Chris had been so sure. It had seemed like Chris's inevitable optimism, his refusal ever to concede defeat. But now.... .

MIKE DUNDEE swore loud, and in the sound of his voice was a consuming bitterness. He rejected the thought, fought it savagely, yet he couldn't shake it off. This kind of crooked game wasn't Chris's way, and yet here it was. Chris had been so certain.

He had had three months of being hunted unjustly, three months of hardship, three months of helpless watching while his cause was pushed inch by inch toward disaster. Chris had been worn down, he was at the end of his rope.

He couldn't be blamed, Mike told himself fiercely. He had taken the only desperate gamble that might save the floundering sheepmen. Well, it wasn't going to save them. It had doomed them.

The booming of hoofs was close upon him. Mike Dundee's head jerked up, and he saw the wave of riders sweeping at him through the dimness of the street. He waited, quite still.

Some of the horsemen rocketed by, some of them split off. There weren't fifty, as had been promised, but there were enough. Four or five had flung themselves off and gone slamming into the court house.

It was then that a voice bawled. "There's one of 'em, by God! Right there!"

Abruptly gun flame speared the gloom of the street. The slug laced within inches of Dundee's head, tore into the saloon's wooden front. Two or three men yelled.

Dundee went back against the board, feeling the wall with his shoulder blades. His fist went down and came up with the weight of his gun. There was in him a sick feeling of futility and anger. They weren't going to give him a chance. There was nothing he could do but fight back, hopelessly, to keep from being shot down.

He watched from beneath narrowed lids as the turmoil of raiders in the street resolved itself into a search for fighting positions. Horses leaped under spurs. More men were running up the street.

A gun blasted again, then twice more, but they were snap shots and missed. With his mouth hard, Mike Dundee shot. He saw the gunman twist around and dive for the corner of the court house.

They had him well pocketed now. From both directions guns were leveled on the area he occupied. Voices with no charity in them were shouting instructions.

Dundee waited. All right, let them come. Chris had taught him not to whine when he was cornered or hurt.

His eyes were searching out attackers, weighing targets. He missed at first the man who came storming out of the court house.

Without, apparently, an atom of concern, Eban Sadler was striding into the middle of the street, peering up and down and across it, roaring to be told what the shooting meant.

Someone yelled to him, and he boomed. "One? And the whole damned lot of you gunnin' for him? Where is he?"

HE CAME on, head thrust forward like an angry bull's. Eban Sadler was big of bone and heavy. He ruled his range as he ruled himself, by a code of ethics that was honest but uncompromising. No one had ever accused him of lying. No one, either, had ever lied to him without penalty.

Mike Dundee, said thinly, "That's close enough, Sadler. Call off your gunhawks, or tell 'em to start it. I don't give a damn which."

No one gave Eban Sadler orders. He came on two more long, unflinching steps, to prove it, before he stopped. "Who the hell are you?"

Dundee made no answer and Sadler, peering more closely, growled. "Well, I'm damned! It's that cocky gun-fighter they throwed at us."

"Not a gun-fighter," Dundee said. "Sheriff!"

"Sheriff, hell! You're no more sheriff than a dog's a judge when he sneaks up on the judge's bench!"

Others had crowded up behind Eban Sadler, making a dark blur of men in the street, Tom Sadler among them. He was lean and big and had a strong way with him, but he wasn't as big as Eban.

Mike Dundee said, holding his voice level. "I hate it as much as you do. Even more, maybe."

"Maybe," said Sadler ironically. "But you ain't in a position to do as much about it as we are." He swung his head jerkily from one side to the other. "Where's the rest of your coyote pack?"

"They went back across the Ridge."

Sadler snorted. "Ran out on you!"

"No. They'd have stayed. I sent 'em."

Someone in the crowd snapped, "Hell with this stallin', Eban. Let's put a rope on him."

Eban Sadler lifted a heavy hand. "I'll decide that." He was scowling at Mike Dundee. "Stayed here alone? You crazy, kid?"

"Crazy enough," Dundee flung at him angrily, "to want to square this while it still can be squared. If you go across that Ridge with guns, it'll be murder. What'll you gain by it? You're not being hurt. You're afraid you're going to be, that's all. Well, you won't be. I give you my word on that. Sheep are on the west side of the Ridge, an' that's where they'll stay. You can't range beef on that land. It ain't good enough. Barber proved that."

"Damn Barber!" Eban Sadler bit out with heavy emphasis. "That double-crossin', half-Injun son—"

"Don't blame Barber. He had to do something or starve. He's got the right to make a livin' the best he knows how, same as those other boys. They ain't fighters or wide-loopers or land-grabbers. All they want—"

"What they want," interrupted Eban Sadler slowly, "they ain't going to get. Your talk sounds fine, but I ain't havin' any. Your word amounts to about as much, I reckon, as that owlhoot brother of yours. There's a better way than bankin' on it. We're goin across the Ridge. By daylight if there's one of your stinkin' woollies within fifty miles of here, it'll be a dead one!"

Mike Dundee's gun was still in his hand. He was against the wall, ringed, stripped of hope, bitterly aware that he had failed.

His voice had a hoarse ring. "There'll be no gun-mob crossin' the Ridge tonight. It's the law talkin'!"

Eban Sadler laughed. "Quit it, kid. You've got some guts in you, sure. I'd hate to see .45 slugs knock it out of you. Get on your pony an' clear out of here. Be glad you didn't get the rope we had tied for you."

Mike Dundee said, "Go to hell!"

Sadler peered at him from under heavy brows. "Wait a minute, son."

"The first man," said Mike Dundee, "who sets his foot in a stirrup touches off hell. That goes as it lays. I ain't the law you want, but I'm the law you've got!"

There was a moment of explosive silence. In it the whispering of metal against leather bulked large. The click of guns being cocked ran around the circle like the ragged ticking of a broken watch.

ONE MAN in particular caught Dundee's eye. He was across from Sadler, a lean man with pinched snaring fea-

tures. Les Bayard of the Bar Crescent had always chafed under Eban Sadler's leadership. He reckoned himself an abler man, only deprived of recognition by Eban Sadler's traditionally heavy hand.

Blood-hungry, he was bitter at the delay. His body tensed, and Dundee judged it was from him the first bullet would come.

Eban Sadler saw it too, and his voice had a bite in it. "I'll figger this, Les. We ain't turned into a wolf-pack yet!" He took an abrupt step toward Mike Dundee. "Hang up your iron, kid. It's too bad you didn't have the sense to take to cows. Who blasted that dam?"

Mike Dundee stared at him. "I don't know."

"A sheepman?"

Dundee said hoarsely, "I reckon it was."

"You knew about it?"

"No."

Eban Sadler nodded. "I'll believe that."

Les Bayard shouldered out into the clear with a snarled oath. "You gone plumb loco? He's lyin'! What the hell do you aim to do—set back because one two-bit gun-thrower sticks a gun in your belly, an' let sheep take over this whole damn range?"

Sadler wheeled toward him deliberately. His voice had an easy, commanding assurance that Bayard's lacked. "Sheep won't. I'll guarantee you that. But like Dundee says, they ain't even made a stab at it. Me, I'll back a square game or a square man when I find one."

The direct scrutiny from his steady eyes was more than Bayard was willing to challenge.

Eban Sadler said softly to Dundee. "I'll gamble with you, son, part way. I want the man who dynamited that dam. You're the law. You get him!"

There was something clawing up into Mike Dundee's throat. He tried to swallow it and couldn't.

Sadler's voice kept coming, even and hard. "You've talked straight. Make good on it. I'll give you till daylight. Have him by then or we'll pick up where we're leavin' off now. Get him an' we can talk this whole deal over. If we have to ride over after him ourselves, there won't be a sheepman left on this range by sundown tomorrow night. The cards are dealt, son. You bet 'em."

Eban Sadler swung around, rumbled an order. The circle broke up, speedily, and began to drift in little knots toward saloons.

Mike Dundee was alone against the wall, his gun in his hand, with the full dark close around him—so close that its thickness seemed to choke him. A choked sob lifted in his throat.

CHAPTER THREE

Last Stand for Sheepers

THERE WAS still a suffocating quality to the dark as Mike Dundee rode westward out of Ridge Creek. A sliver of pale moon hung above the distant Skillets, its rays giving weird shape to each bush and knoll along the trail he was traveling. He rode grimly, head down, battling the gnawing, weary ache of his thoughts.

He couldn't turn Chris over to Eban Sadler, couldn't watch while he went through his trail, watch him being sentenced Chris, who had raised him since the time a sheep war in Wyoming had left them fatherless. Devil-May-Care Chris, who could fight and lose and grin and fight again.

But behind Chris was the memory of men like old Ellis Lovelock who had gambled everything on the Stony Ridge range, and Mort Barber whose fine dreams would be smashed at his feet. They had backed him because he was their only hope.

They would fight at daylight if they had to, but they couldn't win.

With an oath in his throat, Mike Dundee groped in desperation for another answer. Les Bayard? He believed that guns were the only cure for sheep. He hated Eban Sadler. He might have dynamited the dam in an effort to bring on a war that he and his tough-fisted gun-crew could dominate.

Mike Dundee shook his head. That wouldn't do. Crafty and harsh Bayard might be, but he wasn't fool enough to risk his water supply and consequently his herd.

No, it came back inevitably—to point damningly at just one man.

With a jerk Mike Dundee pulled his pony to the side of the trail, dropped fist to gun-butt.

Up ahead, from the hazy shape in the shadow of a jutting rock, drifted a low chuckle. "Easy, kid. Just 'cause you're sheriff—"

Mike Dundee said, trying to keep his voice steady, "You hadn't ought to've come down, Chris."

"Hell, I guessed right, didn't I?" Chris Dundee moved his horse away from the rock, came alongside. Mike could see his brother's teeth gleaming through his beard. "I sure gave 'em hell for leavin' you alone in there, though. I was moseyin' in for a look-see."

"I made out."

"Argued Sadler out of it, eh?" Chris nodded. "You always had a knack, kid, when it came to throwin' talk."

There in the moon-streaked darkness, with Chris within touching distance, Mike Dundee had to struggle for his words, as if he were pulling them one at a time out of his throat with a rope.

"It wasn't that easy. Sadler wants the man who busted their damn. I promised to get him, by daylight. Else they come gun slammin' across the Ridge after him."

There it was. Flat and hard.

Chris Dundee whistled. "That's a big order. Can you do it?"

Mike waited a long time, and then said, "Yes, I can."

SUDDENLY he was angry with himself, furiously angry. In him was something which prevented his turning to Chris and blurting out his blunt accusation. It had to come from Chris, or a feeling which had always bound them together would be irreparably shattered.

Chris had to say, of his own volition, "Kid, it was me. I thought it was right, but it wasn't. If it means grief for the rest of 'em, I'll stand good for it." He couldn't look at Chris and have Chris lie to him, or watch while the shame of his silence crept across Chris' face.

Chris Dundee lifted his thin shoulders. "Well, let's get at it. Daylight, you said? There ain't much time to fool away talkin'." Doggedly Mike Dundee tried again. "I figger on lettin' this gent speak up for himself. Alone if he wants to. Or in front of the rest of the boys if he won't."

Chris nodded. "You're the sheriff, kid. Any way you call it suits me."

His armor was complete. Mike's voice shook a little as he said, "Barber's got more room. We'll meet there. You make a circle an' come down from the north. I'll take the south end."

"Sure thing. I'll get everybody I can get hold of fast." Chris started to rein off, stopped and turned. "You sounded kind of funny, kid. What's the matter? Ain't you sure?"

Mike Dundee stared across the length of darkness. "Yes," he said. "Dead sure."

Mike Dundee watched Chris's figure being swallowed by the night, watched it until the trail turned and there was only the black, hanging curtain with the little star rips high up in it.

He had sent Chris purposely to the

north. He wondered now if Chris would come back. There would be a chance, if he wanted it, to slip across into the Skillets, and oblivion.

He was groping still for a way out when he left the trail to cut across after old Ellis Lovelock. He could put the thing up to the gathered sheepmen. It was their decision, really. On the action of one of them hinged their collective fates. They could decide. They could turn him over to the law, or they could back his lawless play, hopelessly, futilely.

Mike Dundee wondered if Chris was the kind of coward who would let that happen.

There followed better than an hour of steady riding through the night, open approaches to ramshackle cabins or sheep wagons, exchanges of brusquely grim words. There were women in some of the cabins, women who stared after him as he rode away.

The purpose of the meeting he didn't explain. It was assumed that a raid impended from across the Ridge, and the sheepmen prepared doggedly and silently to meet it.

IT WAS well past midnight, Mike Dundee judged, when he reached Mort Barber's. The big ranch house loomed in the dark like a sprawling castle. In the early days Barber had hauled logs for it all the way from Skillets, and had planted a double row of poplars to enclose the yard.

The glory of it, though, was now gone. Neglected, half of the ragged poplars were dead. Two or three had blown down. The weight of the logs had broken down the foundations in one corner of the house, and most of the doors refused to close. Several windows were gone. The penniless Barber had patched them by nailing boards across the frames.

There was a pitiful aspect to the baronial manner in which he paced the wide front porch. Two kerosene torches set in sockets by the door threw light against his wrinkled old face and showed to poor advantage his untrimmed beard and the ragged, graying hair which lay against his neck.

There was no question in his mind about defeat. "We'll run 'em back across that Ridge," he said more than once. "Damn murderin' sons! We'll run 'em clean to the Skillets."

He might have been watching the orderly accumulation of a well-trained army of gun-fighters. They weren't that. In the shadows of the porch, silent, his jaw set, Mike Dundee watched them come.

Singly or in twos and threes they drifted into the ranch yard. There were a few good rifles among them. Mostly their arms were battered shot-guns and old pistols.

It was Chris whom Mike Dundee was waiting for. And Chris hadn't come. The warmth of the night couldn't dispel the feeling of chill around his heart. An hour ago he hadn't known what he was going to do. He knew now. Sight of the faces moving there in the circle of torchlight told him.

They were willing to fight for their homes and their sheep, but they weren't fighters. Chris must talk. And if he wouldn't, he—Mike Dundee—must speak for him.

Mike Dundee was accepting that bitter conclusion, steeling himself for it, when the first shots came.

They were far off, to the north, like the thumping of a hammer against Stone Ridge. It clipped off talk and movement in the Barber ranch yard, and into that tight silence fell the echoes of another distant volley.

Someone murmured in a queerly strained voice. "Well, I reckon that starts it."

They were looking at him, Mike Dun-

dee realized, waiting for his leadership. Anger was pounding through him. Eban Sadler had promised a daylight deadline. It wasn't daylight, yet the cattlemen had moved across the Ridge. The point was strategic—a drive started there would sweep down the valley, sweep the sheepmen out of it.

MIKE DUNDEE'S orders were crisply snapped. He heard someone mutter. "That'll most likely be Linkmann's place."

Then out of the quiet sprang hustling confusion. One after another men mounted, went surging through the smoky halo of the burning torches behind Dundee.

Mike Dundee looked back over his shoulder. Ten or a dozen men were behind him, stringing out on mounts that weren't fast travelers or night travelers. The four or five horses that Mort Barber had provided were the best of the lot.

They were swinging along the base of the Ridge, over thin, burned turf that skirted stretches of loose rock. That beat of hoofs rolled into the gullies of the Ridge, and droned back again.

Mike Dundee's face was hard-set. He didn't look back again at his straggling little army. This was hopeless. He knew it, but it was one of those forlorn efforts that had to be made. Harsh though it was, he was relieved of one responsibility. Chris hadn't come back, but it was too late for that now.

Mort Barber, well-mounted, pulled alongside. "Torched the place, it looked like," he growled. "You reckon Ed got out?"

No answer was required. The crackle of nearing gunfire told that a fight was still in progress. The fire itself was still concealed by timber which grew in scraggly patches on the Ridge, but there was a dull glow against the sky.

On the right the Ridge stood out like some huge sleeping monster, blackly outlined against the sky.

Dundee grunted at Barber, and they swerved, cutting to the right into one of the broad gullies which went tapering half a mile or more back into the great rocky backbone. Listening, he was surprised that there were riders still behind them. Hard and dogged riding had held at least half the party together.

Dundee's pony was laboring, and he eased the fast pace off a bit. It was darker here with the brushy slopes mounting around them. The light from the paring of the moon poised above the distant Skillets was hardly light at all.

Barber was muttering fiercely, "We'll run 'em clean off this range. We'll run 'em to hell-an'-gone!"

The shooting was sporadic now but it was continuing, and it was louder. The red glare of the flames spouted from just over the brush-strewn slope on the left.

Mike Dundee put his mount to the slope, sent his crashing up it in buck-jumps. Just below the rim he pulled in, went sprawling out of the saddle and running on. Mort Barber was at his shoulder, panting gustily.

Ruddy light from the burning cabin filled the little basin, glinted on the surface of the little spring which trickled away out of the rocks. The cabin was done for. The roof had caved in, and already the flames were dwindling.

At the rim of the field of firelight shadows moved, appeared and disappeared. At intervals spurts of gun flame lashed out from those shadows. It was the sheep shed they were circling, directing their fire against. Ed Linkmann, apparently, had somehow got out of the burning cabin and was making his stand in the sheep shed some twenty yards off.

Guns were still blasting an answer from the shed. Smoke curled from cracks or punched-out boards.

Movement between the house and the

shed abruptly caught Mike Dundee's eyes. He swore, because for a moment it looked like a man. It wasn't. It was a dog, struggling to get up and not making it. Mike knew that dog. It was Ed Linkmann's, gone blind after eleven years of service, pensioned off. They said Ed Linkmann fed that dog when it meant going hungry himself.

What had happened was clear enough. He had tried to escape with his master. A bullet intended for Linkmann had hit him and had paralyzed his hind quarters. It seemed to Mike Dundee that he could almost hear the animal's frenzied whining.

That thought had no more than been born before a figure was running from the shed. The man had hurdled some rude barricade placed at the open end, was sprinting for the dog. It wasn't Linkmann. Linkmann was burly and squat. This man was tall, stooped-shouldered and lean. Almost gaunt.

Mike Dundee's breath sobbed in his lungs. That man was Chris.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood Will Wash a Range

CHRIS DUNDEE made it to the dog, stooped, swept it up in his arms. He was going back, couched over, and zigzagging, when the bullet hit him.

Each detail of it was clear to Mike Dundee's staring gaze. Chris was stumbling, pitching forward. He caught himself on one hand, and bullets kicked up dirt in his face. He was lunging up, staggering but still running. He got to the shed's barricaded open end, went plunging head-first across it with the dog in his arms.

Mike Dundee had sprung to his feet, drawing his revolver.

Barber caught his arm. "Hold it, son. They'll gun you down 'fore you ever get that far."

"Ed's hurt too, or he'd have gone," Dundee snapped. "I'm going down there."

More of the sheepmen had come scrambling up to the summit of the slope. There was a murmur of assent that Dundee cut off. "You'll do more good up here. We'll need guns to cover us gettin' back."

He was off, leaping down the slope, dodging brush, weaving past the upthrust roots of a wind-blown pine. He was halfway down before a gun challenged him. The lead clipped twigs behind him.

Around the rim of firelight more guns opened up, the crash of the shooting bounding back and forth in the little basin. Lead thrashed and sang along the slope, but in the ragged, flickering light, moving low-bent at headlong speed, he made a target that only a lucky shot could catch.

A nest of rocks waylaid him. He tripped in it, went sprawling. He heard, as he scrambled up, the rushing thud of boots behind him, and the grunt of a man who had been bullet-hit.

He had only a swift glimpse of the hunched figure of old Mort Barber charging in his wake—then he was up, sprinting over ground that had leveled off. A shape rose out of the darkness in front of him. Mike Dundee shot, and the figure dropped. The open mouth of the sheep shed loomed.

He yelled, "Chris!" and dove into it.

He landed on his hands and knees in packed dirt. Three steps behind him, Barber stumbled and fell across the barricade which had been thrown hastily into position.

Out of the darkness came Chris Dundee's low chuckle. "Sure lucky you hollered, kid. I was primed to take me a scalp. You hit?"

There was the slap and rip of bullets coming through the thin walls.

Mike Dundee swore. "Cripes, this is like fightin' inside a paper bag. Give me

a hand, Chris, an' we'll get a chunk or two of wood in front of us."

Chris said, after a moment, "Well, now, kid, maybe I better stay where I am."

Mike could see more clearly now—a faint red glow seeped through the cracks—and he went across to his brother.

Chris said, "Take it easy. It's kind of between my belly an' my middle ribs. I ain't spittin' any blood, but the less jumpin' around I do the better I'll like it."

From the far corner where he was propped up by a crack in the wall Ed Linkmann croaked. "I'd have gone after Bill. It was my right."

"Sure it was, Ed." Chris's voice was soft. "Only I like that dog too, an' your ankle's broke."

MIKE DUNDEE went back to the shed's open end, and with Barber's help dragged in a log that would serve as a breastworks. Bellied flat behind it, he squinted through a gap in the loose planks. The fire was dying down. Off to the right a pair of rifles were methodically lacing the shed with bullets.

From the shadows beyond a voice lifted suddenly. "In the shed, there! You haven't got a chance. Take your sheep an' pull off this range, an' we'll let you go!"

It was Mort Barber who piped back. "We'll walk out of here, or we'll git toted out, mister. Your trouble right now ain't sheep, but bullets. Come an' git it!"

Mike Dundee scowled and looked at Chris. "Sadler out there?"

"Hell, no. That's Bayard. Judgin' from what you told me, he jumped the gun a little. I was moseyin' along a little north of here when I bumped into him. Got eight-ten men with him, I'd say. They opened up on me, an' I sky-hooted for here. Shootin' roused Ed. They took the house an' we holed up in this damn sieve."

"Bayard?" demanded Barber shrilly. "That lousy, rattlin' son! He told me—".

A shadow out yonder moved for a raking shot, and Mike Dundee threw down on it. The explosion touched off a blasting fusillade. Slugs from rifles and sixguns pounded the flimsy shed with vicious steadiness. The boom of the reports, the tearing of bullets into wood, created a ringing din that made the eardrums ache. Risking a return shot verged on suicide.

It couldn't last. As the first trace of red sun appeared in the east, Mike Dundee heard Chris calling softly, "Ed! How you makin' it, Ed? Ed!"

He got no answer other than a low whining from the dog, Bill.

Ed Linkmann was dead. Under subsequent showers of lead the remaining defenders would be picked off too. The corners of Mike Dundee's mouth were taut. There was no escape from this murder pocket—not with Chris lying helpless, unable to move.

They could fight it through and be wiped out, but that would leave the other sheepmen leaderless, robbed of their best guns. And having paid a price in blood and men, Les Bayard probably wouldn't be content with merely allowing the sheepmen to evacuate the valley. There would be more burning, more bloodshed.

The answer was surrender. This bitter conclusion revolved in Mike Dundee's mind. It meant failure, and the loss of everything but their lives. It meant, perhaps, being mocked as cowards, yet there was no other way.

The breath was like something solid in Mike Dundee's throat. He gulped to clear it before he yelled.

Old Mort Barber's voice trembled as he cried, "By God, Mike, listen! You hear that?"

MIKE heard it. The shooting had lulled. From the Ridge side of the basin came the rattle of hoofs, and as the sound swelled, the shooting stopped. Mike

Dundee put his eye to the crack he had been using as a gun port.

Down the far slope, limped by the rising sun's first crimson rays, was pouring a stream of riders. Dundee counted, a score or more, pitching full tilt down the rocky incline, guns out and glinting in the firelight. Leading them, looming shaggy and bull-like in the saddle was Eban Sadler.

They hit the basin, spread out in it, all but filling it. Horses reared and turned. And Eban Sadler was roaring, "Bayard! Damn you, Bayard! Where are you?"

Bayard's voice came with cool scorn: "Get out of there, you damn fool. Them sheep-stinkin' sons will drill you."

"They'll ketch hell at both ends if they try it," Sadler snapped. "Come out here."

Bayard came, but he came in his own good time, with exasperating deliberateness. His sixgun was unholstered. On his lean, pinched face was a look of crafty rebellion.

"You heard what I promised Dundee!" Sadler shot at him.

Bayard shrugged. "Since when you promisin' for every Tom, Dick an' Harry on this range? I figgered this play different."

"When I make a promise," said Sadler, "I make it stick. You aimin' to buck that, are you?"

Bayard was very cool. "Maybe. I say it's time for a showdown. It looks to me like you've got wool in your teeth. You backed down earlier tonight when you could have put a crimp in this whole thing. You're aimin' now, I reckon, to let a bunch of mangy sheepherders off scot-free after they've drilled a couple of my men. Well, I say different! Either you're for cattle on this range or you're for sheep. There ain't no middle-between."

"Might be," said Eban Sadler carefully, "that there is."

"I say there ain't!" Bayard's voice was harsh. "I say there's one way to keep sheep where they belong, an' that's with guns! You been runnin' this range with a mighty high hand, mister. Well, right here's where we find out whether or not we been makin' a mistake. Name your stand, Sadler, an' let the boys decide. Sheep or cows!"

It was a challenge, rough and hard, with Eban Sadler crowded into a corner he wouldn't have picked.

Sadler's head swung slowly. His own men he could bank on, but there was the Flying Y and two or three cattlemen whose holdings were smaller. Mike Dundee could read those faces too, and he understood Sadler, alone, couldn't win.

Dundee was on his feet, climbing over the barricade at the shed's open end. Behind him he could head Barber curse.

He still striding across the open. Eban Sadler's shaggy head lifted. The set of his powerful face was hard. It seemed to Dundee even that Sadler was glad to see him, and he understood why.

Sadler said heavily, "Anybody who claims I'd double-cross cow-folks, lies." He was looking at Dundee. "Son, I made you a promise earlier tonight. I thought it was fair and right then. I still do. I'll stand back of it, because I figger it's the best thing for this range."

Bayard snarled, "He ain't got him an' won't get him! He bluffed you out."

"You'd get the man who blasted the dam," Sadler went on steadily, "to prove you were square an' the sheepmen west of the Ridge were square. That was your end of the promise. If you didn't, I was to run sheep off this range. My end holds, son, if yours don't. Have you got him?"

THE WARMTH of the nearby fire was against Mike Dundee's face, but that wasn't what sent sweat in little rivulets down under his shirt collar. The faces before him held nothing but merci-

less scrutiny. No one said a thing.

He opened his mouth to speak, and no words came. Chris was back there, wounded, helpless. Chris could hear what was being said. He could say, "I did it! I'm the man you want!"

There was no word from the sheep shed. The silence became a harsh, crackling thing sawing at men's nerves.

It was broken by no cry, but an easy, casual, drawl. "Send your sheriff over, Sadler. I'd go to him, but I reckon this is about as far as I can get."

Chris Dundee was at the corner of the shed. He had crawled there, pulled himself up, and was standing propped against the wall. Not a pair of eyes but turned to him, sagging there against the boards, fighting to keep his voice under control.

"Seemed like a good stunt at the time—settin' that charge of powder. It was a lousy job, but I was some hasty with it." His tone hardened. "Well, Sheriff, what you waitin' on? Get it over with an' give sheep the break they got comin'!"

Still Mike Dundee could not move. At his elbow he could feel old Mort Barber trembling. Suddenly the old man's voice creaked out shrilly:

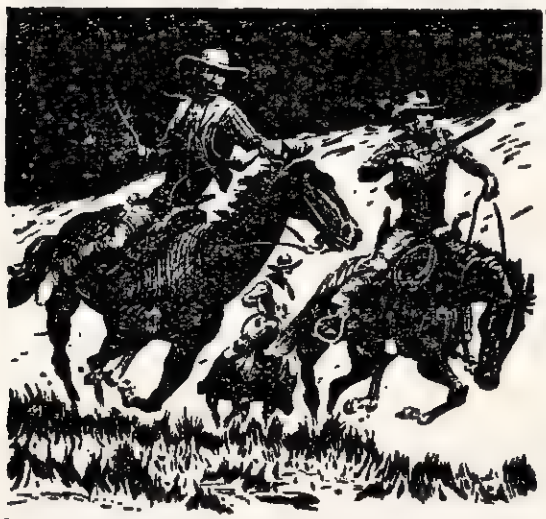
"Hell, it wasn't him! It was me done it. I ain't sorry, an' I'd do it again!"

MIKE DUNDEE swung around, staring. Mort Barber stood braced on widespread feet, a shrunken figure, his uncut beard and hair giving him an appearance of wildness. His wrinkled face was taut with strain. His eyes were fiercely burning. He gestured with the gun in his right hand; his left dangled uselessly, a dark stain smearing the arm.

"Sure!" he cried. "You had it comin', all of you. I tried cows." His voice was shaking. "Near all my life I tried cows. I guess nobody ever had a tougher time. An' you wouldn't help me. My land was no good, you said. Only you were afraid I'd build up my outfit so's it'd be big like yours. Bigger, even! I'd have had the biggest spread south of the Missouri!"

He stopped, staring about him, and in his eyes was the shadow of those dreams which poverty and reverses had never shaken from him.

"Not good land," he whispered. "But it was good. Good for sheep! I'd have built up again. I'd have had a million sheep runnin' on my range. I'd have been



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as big as any of you. Only you wouldn't even let me do that! You burned us out, an' stampeded the flocks for the coyotes to pull down, an' set the law on us!"

He lifted his grizzled head defiantly "So when the chance come to square it, I took it. With Dundee runnin' the law, we'd get a fair break. Sure I put a charge of powder under your dam. But the idea wasn't mine in the first place!"

From the edge of the circle Les Bayard ripped out. "Somebody shut the old fool up. He's gone batty!"

"You wish I was," Barber croaked fiercely. "It was you come to me with the scheme. Wanted to see the cattle outfits go broke when they lost their water, you said, so's you could raise sheep on your side of the Ridge. You fooled me, all right! What you wanted was an excuse to run us out!"

Bayard's voice was thin and cold. "He's lying. He wants to crawl out of it, by blamin'—"

"Why didn't that charge smash the dam like it should have?" Barber cried. "I'll tell you. Because it was you gave me the powder. You didn't give me enough to do the job! You knew damn well you wouldn't lose all your water, but you'd have your excuse! I can prove—"

He got no further. The weapon in Les Bayard's hand flamed before a man could move to stop it. Once, twice, he shot. Both bullets hit Mort Barber in the chest. The impact knocked the old man back in two quick jerks, but he got his gun up in his good fist. Got it up. And fired.

LES BAYARD looked down at the gun in his hand. It dropped, and as if he were reaching after it, Bayard fell forward across the shoulder of his mount to the ground. He fell as only a dead man falls.

Mike Dundee made one long jump and caught Mort Barber as he toppled over.

There was a froth of blood on the old man's lips, but no sign of hurt showed in his eyes. He whispered, "Sheep stay—on this side of the Ridge, don't they, Mike? We won that much, anyways?"

It was Eban Sadler, who had dismounted and was bending down, who answered, "My word on it, Mort. You got a raw deal from us. We could have helped you, an' we didn't."

But Mort Barber didn't appear to hear. He had taken his whippings, from Nature and the gods of Luck and his fellow cattle-men, but that was all in the past. None of it mattered now.

He was looking beyond the men huddled over him, looking even beyond the high bulk of Stony Ridge as he whispered, "An' it was me fixed it—so they could stay? Wasn't it?"

Mike Dundee said, "That's right, Mort."

And at last, before he closed his eyes, old Mort Barber had his empire.

"We can clear this up from here on in," Eban Sadler said.

Chris had slumped down to a sitting position, but he could still grin. "Had guts, that old coot," he said. "More'n I'd have had, likely."

Mike Dundee said almost angrily, "Why in hell did you claim it was you?"

Chris Dundee chuckled. "Well, you thought it was me. You'll admit that. Which meant you didn't know who it was. I didn't want any brother of mine lookin' like a damn jackass—on his first sheriffin' job!"

Mike swore. "You'd let me hang you, I reckon, if it came up that way. Just to make it look right!"

"Might." Chris Dundee weighed that judicially. "'Cordin' to some cowmen, they feed sheep meat in hell. That makes it worth while givin' it a whirl, don't it?"

THE END

Bob Poole's Song Corral

Star of "Poole's Paradise," Heard Every Day Over MUTUAL NETWORK

WELL, howdy again. According to the above title this is Bob Poole back with you once more, and of course, we're back with more of this little thing that keeps us eating. Did I say eating? I meant nibbling.

Got a letter in the mail from a fellah who said I should have a slogan for this article, like Sammy Kaye says "Let's swing and sway with Sammy Kaye." He suggested that I write "Let's drip with that drool Bob Poole." As I look back on that line I think he means "Let's drip and drool with Bob Poole."

Well, anyway it's cute and it could be appropriate for this-here column. Any suggestions?

• • •

Well according to my contract—did I write contract, I should have said agreement—I am supposed to give you a little advance information on a few of the latest gramophones that come my way. First I would like to pass on a pathetic story that came my way to Farmer Peter Smud of Winnipeg, Canada. Farmer Smud is $65 poorer because one of his pigs made a hawg of himself. Mr. Smud dropped his billfold in the mud of his pigpen. The pig chewed it up before he could grab it. When he took the tattered money to the bank, Farmer Smud was told it was of no value because the pig had eaten too much of it. So he sold the hawg to pay the bill.

To this poor fellow, we dedicate this perm:

Pity the plight of poor Peter Smud.
He dropped all his money down deep in the mud.
Till his dying day, he will always regret it,
That one of his hawgs had found it and et it.

• • •

Well a nice pert miss has joined the roster of MGM recording. The little lass hails from Arkansas and her given name is Carolina Cotton. With a name like that she can't miss. And speaking of uninhibited titles, here's the first tune she has recorded: *You're Getting A Good Girl* with *Betcha I Getcha.* If you can't catch her records catch her in the moving pictures.

• • •

Do you know the defination of middle age? Well I do. Middle age is when a man will do anything to feel better except give up the thing that is hurting him the most.

Now ain't that the truth? A fella will go to all kinds of expensive doctors and buy all these pills, medicines and take 'em, but he never wants to give up the very thing that causes him all the trouble. He'd

(Continued on page 128)

SALVATION SAM'S

By TOM ROAN

Now that Salvation Sam McGee had hung his guns on the wall and bade the twisting trails farewell, could he regain his savage, matchless trigger-speed in time to purchase a bounty-hunter's silence with the hot-lead coin of the owl-hoot?

Hard-Driving Manhunt Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Lone Wolf

IT WAS one of the meanest spring nights that ever blew across Wyoming. The wind lashed and wailed gales, and the black rain poured down on the tall hills. Slopes turned to muddy floods sweeping everything before them. Little streams became roaring rivers swirling and spouting southward from the railroad tracks, down through the deep valleys and narrow canyons.

From the west end of the tall trestle, Horsethief River looked like the most

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LAST JUDGMENT

A string of riders swung out from an alleyway below the bank, banging away at McGee.

God-forsaken place on earth. It was only a telegraph shack and a gloomy old water tank huddled under a great black-rock shoulder of mountains.

Salvation Sam McGee had known it would be like this. There was no reason in the world for Horsethief River to be anything but a whistle-stop. He had been here before, fifteen years ago. Seven bold, hard-riding, hard-fighting men were in his Rough String that dark and drooling night. Everything was still but a soft whispering of the rain until the gunfire opened up. Then blades of flame had stabbed, men had yelled, women screamed all the way back to the tail-end of the sleeping cars.

Tonight it would be a one-man job, the old gang scattered to the four winds, some dead and in their graves, a couple hung up in the penitentiary for long, long stretches, the living blessed with only the memory of the wild and rollicking tune of outlaw hoofs flying through the dark nights.

He had come up bareback, riding a tall range sorrel, a head-strong, dangerous horse that had been only half-broken at best. Taking no chances yet—not with four sticks of dynamite tightly strapped under his armpits—he eased off the horse at the end of the trestle. In a moment he had slipped a worn-out bridle from the horse, letting him go with a wheel and a snort to head back to freedom in the high hills.

After that he was like a tall, dark ghost walking gingerly across the trestle. Above the deepest part of the river he gave the old bridle a sling, its last job forever done. Walking on, he was getting a guiding glow from the green light above the telegraph shack. The black old water tank began to loom like an enormously fat gran'daddy spider on its tall legs. Rain spilled sheets from its round roof.

When he reached the tank a little yellow tool house at the east side of it gave some shelter from the wind. At the same time it hid him from the glow of the lights eighty yards beyond it. Seating himself on a timber, carbine across his lap, he pushed back the wide black brim of his huge old parson hat, letting the water spill down his shoulders.

IT HAD been here, probably on this same old underpinning of the tank, that he had waited years ago. A sentimental coot, he had a notion that some of the boys might be back watching him, wondering how one lone outlaw was going to come out trying his luck at the crack Westbound Limited tonight.

Looking at him with ghost eyes was maybe Whistling Charley Rhodes, who had done his last whistling with a rope around his neck down on the Brazos. Or Utah Frank or Singing Sam who had smoked it out outnumbered eighty-odd against two down in the Painted Desert sand hills.

The old job here had been fast and furious—a lot of gun-shooting, bullets slapping and crying, nobody getting killed or even hurt. Salvation Sam McGee had never believed in blood-letting. There was no need for it, and it rarely happened unless a man let some yellow-bellied bully talk his way into a gang.

There was not long to sit and think. A faint, far sound came from eastward, reminding him of a long-drawn wolf wail miles away. The next time it was stronger, and at last the far noise of flying wheels whipping the cold wet steel in the darkness—the Westbound, right on time.

He came to his feet, a broad-shouldered, raw-boned bull in the darkness, his long face covered with a black mask. He spoke to himself, voice tired, low, doleful.

"An' now, old mule, we go back to the plow."

He crossed the tracks quickly, eyes on the telegraph shack. On the south side of the tracks was a long line of stacked

cross-ties. He went in behind them, slipping along from one stack to the other. At the right spot he squatted to a halt, something like a low chuckle coming from him.

The tracks were popping now, the sounds like a strange drum-tapping. Again the whistle wailed in the distance, its sound like the deep mourn of a pipe-organ rising and falling in the windy darkness. In a little while he heard wheels screaming against the guard-rails as she rounded a long curve, the glare of her headlight sweeping the hills, her roar beginning to fall away, the smell of smoke whipping ahead.

When the engine passed, the smell of hot oil and steam filled his nose. The brake shoes chattered and cried as the long train came to a slow stop. He was in the right place, having to move past only one more stack of cross-ties before he bobbed forward and was at the rear end of the express car. Stepping in noiselessly, he turned off the valves of the hoselines, then quietly lifted the levers that uncoupled the cars.

The rest of it was simple. There was only a slight quickening of his pulse and the feeling of a certain, bullish bowing of his neck as he walked quietly back between two stacks of ties. He turned toward the engine, keeping on the blind side as long as he could.

When he came to the engine everything seemed so cut-and-dried that another man might have suspected a trap. He was not afraid of that. This was a secret. No one on earth knew he was going to rob this train but Sam McGee, and as long as only one man knew a thing, it was a secret. When two or more knew something it was public property, often as good as putting it in a newspaper.

Bundled into a raincoat, carrying an oil can and a lantern, the engineer was on the ground on the other side of the engine, squirting oil in the hot bearings. The fireman was back on the tender with the big spout down from the tank, taking the usual fill-up on water here at Horsethief River. The heavy canvas storm curtain was down over the rear end of the cab.

Having to take a chance at some time, McGee went up the steps and hand grips, enough light coming from the cab for him to see that the fireman had his back turned.

It was quick, going up and under the storm curtain, and plopping himself on the fireman's seat, the storm curtain hiding him from the tender. The old slicker was unlatched now and flung back. A stubby-nosed carbine lay across his lap. A long Peacemaker had come into his big right hand as he calmly sat there, humming an old hymn under his breath.

THE engineer was first to return, a big, square-jawed man of fifty with a ruddy face and dark red hair. He came up on the left side, ducked under the storm curtain and onto his seat. He stopped with his back to McGee, setting his lantern and oil can in front of his seat while he wiggled himself out of his raincoat and started wiping his hands.

The fireman was back before the engineer turned, a big, dark and handsome fellow of thirty. The first thing he saw in the light of the cab was Salvation Sam McGee, sitting up there on his seat as if he owned it. At his grunt of surprise, the engineer turned with a quick start.

"Just don't get yore innards in an uproar." McGee's voice was gentle, his old Peacemaker covering them. "There ain't a thing in the world to get excited about. Just set up there an' pull yore throttle an' get us rolling, Mr. Engineer."

"What in hell is this?" The fireman stiffened, mouth open, eyes popping. "This is a railroad train!"

McGee bared his gold-capped teeth in a grin. "I'm right glad yuh told me, seein'

as how I might not know it, but I still said get it up an' get out of here. I don't want to hurt yuh, don't want to have to bully yuh, but I do mean get the hell goin'. This is a hold-up.

"Step in closer behind 'im, fireman." He wiggled the old Colt. "I ain't hurtin' yuh either, if I can help it. Ain't no fun in killin' a fella, not if yuh can help it. Move, I said."

The fireman gasped, finding his voice at last. "Gawd A'mighty, that gun's got a hole in it big enough to jump a bull in! Better crack that throttle!"

"I'm not a man to bluff." The engineer was suddenly snarling, big red hands opening and clenching. "I come from a fightin' race of—"

The thunder of the Peacemaker cut him short, a bullet striking the steel floor of the cab, the splattering of lead prickling needles in his ankles. He wheeled with a yell, bouncing to his seat, grabbing the throttle and the lever of the air valve.

Letting the air go and yanking open the throttle, he started the big engine with a lurch. The slack jerked out of the forward cars, the end of the express uncoupled and parted company with the rest of the train. The hose lines popped as they came apart.

Salvation Sam McGee's one-man stab at the Westbound Limited was on its way, the engine nosing out across the trestle and picking up speed at every turn of the drivers, no one behind them yet knowing exactly what was happening.

CHAPTER TWO

Outlaw Guns

THE DYING wind at dawn found him in the rain again, mounted on another half-wild range horse, this time a tall, long-legged black with a lot of get up and go. Behind him the world was as good as afire from end to end, telegraph instruments at Horsethief River having chattered out their tales of woe, the wet wires singing the story of the hold-up far east and west, the branch lines taking it into Utah, Montana, Idaho and Colorado.

It had been so simple it would be scarcely worth remembering in the future. He had to chuckle now and then as he rode on into the high and wild country, the stout canvas bags tied to the horn and cantle of his big old saddle.

There had been no hitch in his plans this far. Keeping the forward part of the train on the main line for ten miles, he had given the fireman a big copper switch key, herding him and the engineer down in the rain to throw a rusty switch.

Back in the cab they had pulled in on the rusty rails of a winding track reaching southward into the hills. Once the train had cleared the main line he had brought it to a second stop, herding the fireman and engineer back to throw the switch again.

The rest of his job had been finished at a long-unworked old mining camp a dozen miles south of the main line. Two sticks of dynamite exploded beside the rear end of the express car had convinced the expressman it was time to open the door. With the engineer and fireman herded into the car ahead of him, each armed with a long old crowbar from the mine tool-house, it had not taken long for the big locks to be broken from the strong box.

Ten minutes later he had stood in the rain watching the train slowly backing away, lighter by eighty thousand dollars in currency.

In spite of all they could do about it back there it would be hours yet before a posse could be formed. Others would be ahead, of course, still more hoping to close in from both sides. Everybody would be trying to play dashing hero, armed hounds making a great show of themselves as they came storming out to try to pick up

the trail of the wily old fox of the hills.

He had been through all these things before. In other days it was far more exciting and worrying. With his old Rough String he had been forced to do the most of the thinking and planning. As their leader it had been up to him to pick the route of their get-aways, pointing one out for this man, another for that one, always hoping and sometimes praying that he was doing the right thing by them.

Their blood, their very lives had rested in his hands, and few of the men who had ridden with him had failed or even hesitated to take his word for it. This morning he rode it alone, slopping and banging along, sometimes crooning his half-forgotten hymns through his long and curving old nose, nobody in the wide world to worry about right now but Salvation Sam McGee.

It was just before noon that he had done all he could to blind his trail and was getting close to the place where he would part company with the horse. Once he let go, he would easily find his way back to the peaceful valleys and maybe rejoin the old horse that had been ridden as far as the trestle.

The country was high and hellishly wild now. A man not knowing his business might never come out of it. Winding along a rocky gorge in muddy water halfway to the horse's knees, the walls at either hand were towering, overhanging ledges and shaggy crags.

Around a bend where his knees touched rock at either side, he spurred the snorting horse upward, the rocks to his left swinging back until he was above a thundering spillway. The shelf up here was so narrow and rough that most men afoot would have shunned it as too dangerous for travel.

FOR forty minutes he kept the horse climbing. Around another turn he might have appeared as a ghost rider perched on a shaggy shelf a mile in the sky. Looking back from here he saw only clinging arms of fog, the rain thinning to a dark drizzle, no hint or threat of wind left.

Down one more slope, a long and grassy one now, and he was at the place. Here he was at the end of a swollen arm of water at the east side of a narrow valley that sloped upward to the right and widened away to westward. Its floor was densely covered with shale and sagebrush, a good place for the horse to leave no sign of a trail behind.

Everything was here, just as he had left it. Slipping out of his saddle, still holding a tight rein on the horse, he looked all around, making sure. Under a great overhang of rocks and brush to his left and down, held in place by strips of wire, was a raft. It was long and narrow, made of switch-ties floated down from the railroad. Covered with a big square of dark canvas and carefully placed boughs, it was so well-hidden one might have passed within thirty feet without knowing it was there.

"An' now comes the time," he intoned, turning back to the horse, "when the best of friends must part. Yuh been a good fella, old hoss. Go yore gentle way an' fall in the hands of no more sinners. May yuh spend the rest of yore days in peace, an' no other man every put a bridle or saddle on yuh."

Unsaddled, bridle slipped off and given a pat on the neck, the horse was going up the valley a minute later. In a few minutes after that Sam McGee was going in the opposite direction, using a broad plank fashioned into a sweep for the rear end of the raft. Everything was loaded aboard. Humming another old hymn through his nose he was heading for swift water only seventy or eighty yards away.

Five mornings later, shortly before eight o'clock and nearly eight hundred miles away, Salvation Sam McGee wound

down out of the bald sea of hills in the north and drove into Painted Rock, Arizona. Sitting behind two big black horses in the lopsided seat of a long old buckboard, he showed no sign of recent wear and tear. His long old face was as slick as a weasel's back, his gold-toothed smile ready to beam in any direction.

Behind him and underfoot, the bed of the buckboard was filled with cases and partitioned wooden boxes of patent medicine. On top of the medicine rode a light camp outfit and his riding outfit, covered with a heavy strip of canvas.

Pulling up at the east end of the long porch of the old adobe jail at the head of the street, he spoke to a big, red-faced man sitting there cleaning a rifle.

"Good mornin', Hank." His tone somehow carried a hymn-like roll. "Yuh goin' huntin' lions or somethin'?"

"Why, howdy, Salvation!" Henry Horsely, the sheriff of Painted Rock, looked up with a quick grin. "Where've yuh been for the past three or four weeks? Out curin' the sick an' walkin' the lame?"

"As usual, Hank." McGee was looking down the shade-lined street at the flat-roofed adobe houses. "An' maybe sorter straightenin' out some of the kinks in the souls of the wicked. What's new?"

"Bank was robbed yesterday in San Gabriel." The sheriff nodded southward, meaning a town eighty miles away. "Just before closin' time, the telegraph office down at the depot said. Seven men kicked the bank over an' killed four men. Got away with only nine thousan' dollars. Country's gettin' damn tough all over, Salvation. Guess even in the hills yuh mighta heard about the big train robbery 'way off up yonder in Wyomin' a few days ago?"

"WHEN in the hills," McGee was still looking down the street, "yuh hear nothing', see nothin', an' sometimes forget the little yuh mighta knowed in the first place, Hank. Why did seven men robbin' a tinhorn bank like that one in San Gabriel have to kill four men?"

"Young, scared an' gutless to start with." The sheriff lifted his rifle, squinting down the bore. "It's said they headed for the border, but I'm a sharp man, Salvation. Born that way, I guess, an' just can't he'p it. Sometimes fellas like that change their minds. That's where I nail 'em. The outlaw ain't smart enough to catch me nappin'. Hell, Salvation, I can smell one a mile away—an' him with the wind in his favor. I'm just that keen."

"You've shorely got a mighty good nose, Hank." McGee grinned as he lifted his long lines and gave them a light flap on the rumps of the horses. "Yuh keep that mighty fine nose sorter tilted in the wind an' a-smellin'. These days it's purty hard for a fella to tell when a bedbug's gonna come creepin' up an' crawl in bed with 'im."

He flapped the lines again. The horses started to move on. A sudden yell and the heavy, echo-rocking report of a six-shooter stopped everything. Before a man could blink, a second, third and fourth shot had come, more shrieks down the street rising into a wild lament.

"Lord, Lord!" The sheriff had stiffened in his chair, eyes popping, face white. "What the hell is that, Salvation!"

"Guns, I'd say offhand, Hank." McGee was cool and grim, blue eyes cocked guns themselves staring down the street. "It looks sorter like that nose of yores ain't workin' this mornin'. The San Gabriel bunch, I reckon, are robbin' our little one-hoss bank now."

A wilder rise in the gunfire at that instant made a cracking and spilling sound on the porch, bullets whistling up the street. A leg under the sheriff's chair had suddenly turned to flying splinters, pitching the chair over on its right side. The sheriff and his rifle went with it, the big man so addled by surprise he was like a

dazed bull floundering there on the floor.

"Robbery!" bawled a voice down the street. "Robbery!"

A man fell dead down there. He was little and old, a limping figure running from the front of the bank and staggering to a halt in the middle of the street. Both hands clamped to his stomach, he weaved drunkenly, then pitched forward, hat flying off, his head a ball of silver in the morning sunlight.

Salvation Sam McGee looked back at the big sheriff. Horsely had blundered to his feet, trying with desperation to get the bolt back in his empty rifle, so scared by this time his big round face looked like a greenish-yellow mask. Without thinking of what he was about to do, Sam McGee reached down, pulling up his stubby-nosed carbine from under the seat.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail-Chopper

HIS ONLY thought had been to keep himself out of it. Then he saw Old Charley Smith fall dead in the dust. That was out and out murder. Old Charley Smith had never harmed anybody. He was the town's one professional swamper. As a clean-upper he had keys to three saloons and three or four stores as well as for the bank.

Every morning except Sunday it was his job to sweep the bank and mop the floor. Caught in the hell of all the noise, scared and running for his life, he had been shot down by some would-be badman from the doorway of the bank.

Horses standing with their heads up and ears cocked, Sam McGee fired his first shot when he saw a string or riders suddenly swing out from an alleyway just below the bank. A big, red-headed dude and a handsome, blonde-haired squirt had the canvas sacks tied to their saddles.

Like those behind them, they had their reins in their teeth and were shooting with each hand as they headed on across the street for another alleyway that would take them to the creek.

At the first report of the old carbine the big redhead jerked high in his stirrups, hands dropping his six-shooters. Buckling backward, he was like a long-legged monkey spilling over the cantle of his saddle, the blond yelling something right behind him and trying to swing his horse before it was too late.

It was the last time the blond fellow yelled anything. With a furious old hand on the loading lever, Salvation Sam McGee fired his second shot. At the crash of the carbine a second man down there was pitching drunkenly from his saddle, going over the horn as his horse banged into the horse that had shied to a stop just ahead.

He might have killed the other five wild fools, but something held him. Gripped with sudden terror after seeing what had happened to the others who were evidently their leaders, the five were swinging down the street. McGee instantly saw that their crazy shooting had stopped.

The one thought in their fool heads now was to put Painted Rock behind them as quickly as they could. At the foot of the street they wheeled to the right, around the corner of the old blacksmith shop and were gone, the job they had come to do a complete wash-out.

"Yuh old fool!" roared the sheriff in the sudden lull. "Yuh damned old fool, why in hell did yuh stop shootin'? Yuh coulda killed ever' one of 'em!"

"I ain't the sheriff of Painted Rock, Hank." McGee turned and looked at him through his gunsmoke with those cocked blue eyes. "Then, too, there's a sort of an unwritten law with me like some others I've met in the past. I never shoot a man in the back. The rest, I reckon, is up to yuh now. 'Pears like they didn't get away with the money, the pore damn fools.

"An' while yo're about it, Hank," he stabbed a big forefinger at him, "yuh better have that nose of yores bored out with an auger or somethin'. From what we've just seen it must be kinda goin' back on yuh."

It was his chance now, the sheriff bull-jumping off the porch and running down the street to join the wildly gathering crowd. Excitement down there now was so great that very few men would ever know exactly what had happened. Seeing the sheriff still hanging onto his empty rifle a wild cheering lifted for him.

SAM McGEE smiled, already having slipped the carbine back where it belonged. Never in his life had he wanted to be a hero. He flapped his lines and turned abruptly across the head of the street. They would never know that the big, proud-of-himself Hank Horsely didn't do the shooting that saved the money—if he just kept his mouth shut.

Not having to smile and bow to everybody this morning, he was soon behind the houses on the west side of the street, between their rear walls and the deep drop-off to the creek. He knew everybody here, having lived in Painted Rock for two years now.

Until this trip he had never been far away, doctoring horses and people with his patent medicines. Considered as a full-fledged citizen by this time, he had come to know even most of the dogs by their names in this sleepy little Border town.

His two-room adobe with an enclosed lean-to shed was back here under the big old trees fifty yards behind the public stables. In thirty minutes, paying no attention to anything else, the buckboard was locked up in the shed, the horses in their rented stalls in the stables.

Excitement still had Painted Rock by the heels and ears. The big sheriff had immediately started yelling for a posse. About thirty men had answered his call, the hastily organized gang soon stringing out of town behind him to try to take up the trail of the five pistol-crazy fools who had made their getaway.

All of it was water over the dam and gone on down the river as far as Salvation Sam McGee was concerned. Now he sat on his little back porch overlooking the creek. His boots and long-tailed black coat had been removed. His belts and long old six-shooters were out of sight in a lower dresser drawer inside.

A respectable looking citizen of Painted Rock, he was sitting there with his socked feet on the rail before him, his big figure comfortable in an old rocker covered with cowhide.

Despite the things that had happened this morning, it was good to get back. Some day, if he could go on keeping things in a straight line, he might be buried in the old Spanish graveyard on the shady rise just east of town, no one ever suspecting his past. No one—except one man. He frowned when he thought of that, his lips tightening, a glassy blue glint coming into his eyes.

But right now he was too tired to think of one certain man.

He was drifting into a doze when a light footstep at the end of the porch popped his eyes open. A man of fifty who looked huge under a brown derby and in a loud-brown suit had appeared. His hair was curly, tightly curled mustaches almost fiery-red, his pink face fat and round. Everybody in Painted Rock and for two hundred miles around knew Bruce Hanlon as one of the most successful gold and silver mine owners in the country.

"Hello, Sam." Hanlon smiled, his teeth gold-capped like McGee's. "I'd say you were quite the man of the hour this morning, but of course Hank will grab the credit for it."

"Set down, Bruce." McGee wiggled a thumb to another old rocker between them. "What happened was an accident,

more or less, an' I'd just as soon hear no more about it. It's nice an' coolin' an' mighty peaceful here. I sorter like the soft an' whispery song the creek sings down there in its rocky bed."

"You're a dreamer, Sam." Bruce Hanlon seated himself beside him and pushed back his derby. "Maybe a poet who just never sprouted wings." He laughed softly. "But that's not what I came to talk about. Let's begin by saying that the old gander seems to have flown fast and far. Only Salvation Sam McGee could have done it."

"Meanin' now," McGee cleared his throat gently, "just what?"

"Wyoming." Bruce Hanlon's tone was like a silky whisper from the side of his handsome mouth. "Horsethief River."

Silence held them for a long time after that. No outward sign of shock had gone through Sam McGee. This hair shining like silver, he sat there looking straight across the creek, Hanlon watching him from the corners of his eyes. Finally the old man spoke.

"I ain't much good at riddles, Bruce." His silvery brows knitted. "Straight talk gets through fast. I'm otherwise sorter dumb."

"Then I'll shoot it straight." There was marked tenseness in Bruce Hanlon's big figure and his voice now. "Let's just call me a trail chopper. Fifty-fifty or Salvation Sam McGee goes to the pen for the rest of his life. That's clear, isn't it, Sam?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Pardners-in-Crime

"YO'RE a right smart man, Bruce." Sam McGee had been silent a long time, Hanlon merely watching him from the corners of his eyes, trying to read the thoughts behind the grim old face. "Army paymaster once, lawyer, judge on a bench, a fair hand at politickin'. Yuh do fair well here, takin' gold an' silver outa holes in the ground what ain't never seen more'n a sprinkle of gold an' silver. Not until it's been looted by gangs in yore pay up an' down both sides of the Border country.

"Hell, Bruce, yuh ain't fooled me." McGee was chuckling now. "Yuh was in the pen the first time I met yuh at Fort Leavenworth for stealin' from the army. Next time was in Deer Lodge, Montana, for robbin' a widow an' a bunch of kids while posing as their lawyer. There's been other things before yuh come here seven or eight years ago, but I guess yuh wouldn't like for the folks of Painted Rock to know that."

"The past is the past, Sam." Hanlon's lips drew into a smirk, not going to let this old outlaw make him lose his temper. "A slight cloud, perhaps, and no more. No jail doors are waiting for me until I'm actually caught at anything I might be doing. If I have something good you're not big enough or smart enough to worry me. I'm safe, maybe smug, Sam, and hard."

"Plenty hard, yeah," nodded the old man with a thin smile, "but maybe not so damn tough, Bruce, a good Peacemaker's ball won't punch a hole in that thick red hide. I don't know what yuh mean talkin' about fifty-fifty, trail choppin' an' sendin' me to the pen, but watch yore step. Don't come here threatenin' me. This town could get too little for us two, an' one might have to go. I once heard of a way to skin a skunk like yuh alive an' still have 'im moanin' an' squirmin' four days atter the hide's off. Red-hot skinnin' knives keep the blood from spillin'."

"You're a tough old bird, Sam." Bruce Hanlon was in full command of himself. "Makes us both tough. That means don't try to scare me. I won't scare. You went away from here for big money to get two old friends out of the pen. When you want their names and numbers, ask me."

He leaned forward, coming to his feet. "That's perhaps enough for now. You've not been fool enough to bring that money into town, but it's close by, not too far away. Eighty-one thousand and nine hundred, the papers said. Today's Thursday. Take until Sunday noon to think it over, and don't try to jump a fast one on me. It won't work, Sam.

"One thing more." He stopped at the edge of the porch and turned back. "Come to think of it, it's damned funny that an old long-trail buzzard like you would have done that shooting this morning. I thought there was some little understanding between birds of a feather."

"Maybe I shot 'em," McGee was smiling, " 'cause it was such a damn botch bein' made out of a job a blind man coulda done without even shootin' a firecracker."

"You're an old bird who would know."

"Yeah, I might, Bruce." McGee chuckled again. "Did I maybe bust up some little job for yuh?" He looked up with a quick leer. "Yuh seem so put out about it a fella sorter gets to thinkin' yore rich gold an' silver ores might not be comin' fast enough an' yuh could be pickin' up a right quick sideline."

"Thinking, Sam, is sometimes damned dangerous."

With a shrug, having started his ball rolling, Bruce Hanlon walked away, leaving him sitting there still looking across the creek. Hanlon had jarred him, he knew, but there had been no sign of it in the long old face.

A LITTLE time would tell more about Salvation Sam McGee, and one had to take his time. Handling that old outlaw was like shooting big guns around a keg of nitroglycerine. Too much of a jar would explode everything, blowing it sky-high. Bruce Hanlon had played many games like this. Pushing strong hunches, he pretended to know a lot more than a man in his position could know.

One thing was certain. He had known what he was saying when he mentioned McGee's two friends in the penitentiary. Ever since McGee had been here Hanlon had been watching him. Almost at once McGee had started corresponding with a powerful law firm in Kansas City, and it had not been hard for a smart man to find out the meaning of that. Not with a good looking woman here in the post office willing to hold up the old bird's incoming and outgoing mail long enough to open it and see what was passing back and forth.

Sam McGee had been called on for fifty thousand dollars, and there had been only one way in the world for the old bat to raise that kind of money. For weeks after that demand had come, Bruce Hanlon had watched him. Not a word had been dropped by the old saddle hawk as to what he was going to do. He had simply disappeared while making one of his rounds.

Back in the street again, Hanlon saw that Painted Rock's excitement was still high, the sheriff and his supposedly daring band gone. A mob was yet jammed in front of the bank. Another was up the street in front of the undertaker's where the bodies of two bank robbers had been taken.

Keeping to the west side of the street, Hanlon turned in at the post office, finding only Dolly Farley behind the window, a tall, dark-haired blue-eyed widow of forty with a quick smile and a bright flash of sparkling white teeth.

"Nothing in the morning mail," he told him, her voice low. "Better luck, possibly, this afternoon. You look very stiff this morning, Bruce. Anything wrong?"

"Loving you too much, maybe." He grinned and gently squeezed her hand through the window. "Robbery was pretty much a flop this morning, wasn't it?"

"I heard the guns, that was all."

"Amateurs, I guess, Dolly." He turned

with a laugh. "See you later in the day."

"Tonight, Bruce?"

"Sure!" He grinned back at her from the doorway. "And soon, I hope, every night until death parts us."

Back outside, he looked down the street and saw a bull in a saddle that was Sheriff Henry Horsely, mounted on his old white Moonlight and returning to town, his posse gone on.

Bruce Hanlon had known it would be like this, Horsely getting everything started and soon swinging back with the excuse that Painted Rock could not be left without him in times like this. The crowd in front of the bank and the undertaker's turned, everybody looking at him as he swung over and pulled up at the edge of the sidewalk beside Hanlon.

"Things kinda went cockeyed, Bruce." His tone was low as he leaned forward over his saddle horn. "I didn't have an idea in the world some old fool like McGee would show up like that."

"What's done is done." Bruce Hanlon glanced right and left. "Not your fault, Hank. Better luck next time. Sam McGee may not be hanging around this town a hell of a lot longer."

"Glad yuh ain't mad." Horsely glanced across the street from the corners of his eyes, people over there beginning to string toward them. "Gettin' mad never helps things between friends with an understandin' like us."

"Surest thing you know, Hank!" Hanlon's voice lifted for the benefit of everybody now. "Catch them and hang all five of them! It's the only way to stop these things!"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Lay That Iron Down"

SAM McGEE went to church Sunday morning. He was carefully brushed, shaved and powdered. He lifted his big hat to the women, bowing and smiling in all directions. No heavy gun-belts sloped away under his long-tailed coat, no sign of weapons on him.

Up front to the right he took his usual place, his dog-eared old hymn book coming out of his pocket. During the singing his voice rolled over the church, deep and resonant. But it was difficult for him to keep from smiling each time he glanced to his left.

The moment he had entered the front door he had seen that Beef Blodgett—Bruce Hanlon's closest associate—was in his usual place. He was just across the aisle. At Blodgett's left was Fanny Farley, the post mistress. To the widow's left was the big and pompous figure of Bruce Hanlon, his curls shining from his hair oil.

It was Beef Blodgett who made it hard to keep back those smiles. One did not see him in church every Sunday morning—sometimes for as many as three or four Sundays in a row. He was about sixty, big, raw-boned and eight or ten years younger than McGee. His shovel-like hands would have passed for McGee's any day—with one exception. The nail of Blodgett's right forefinger was shiny black. A glance at his feet showed that he was still wearing red-toed boots, a marking for himself that seemed to belong only to Beef Blodgett. After the service Blodgett was the first man McGee made it a point to speak to.

"Hear yuh been away agin, Beef." McGee grinned when they were outside. "Missed yuh a couple of mornin's 'fore I left on my rounds.

"Gone a month, trying to buy fall beef, yes." Never a friendly fellow, Blodgett turned his shoulder at once. McGee walked on, smiling to himself. Back at his house, knowing it would not be long before Hanlon would be here, he buckled on his Peacemakers. A few minutes later he was back in the old rocker. When Han-

lon stepped on the end of the porch he spoke without turning his head.

"Beef's liable to get that purty widow yet, Bruce."

"Nice morning, Sam." Hanlon pulled up the bottoms of his fine pants as he dropped into the chair beside him. "What in hell's in that suspicious old head of yours now?"

"Beef Blodgett." McGee was staring across the creek. "Only a select few, I reckon, know he's yore older brother, Bruce. Ain't many who can't see he's yore right hand man. None of which," he sighed, "go far when it comes to a purty woman betwix two men."

"You're a damned old fool, Sam."

"Of course, now," McGee went right on, gently, "yuh hamper his chances, keepin' 'im outa town a lot, way back in the hills an' even on crost the Border. Him an' yore gangs watch the honest mines to see when gold an' silver's goin' out on pack trains so they can stick 'em up an' bring the loot through to yuh. Beef, it's said 'round town, has been gone more'n a month this time, an' didn't get back till last night. The widow mighta met 'im out sommers."

"That'll do, Sam!" Hanlon's tone was a rasp as he cut him off, his face pale. "Leave her name out of it. You know why I'm here, you damned old buzzard. You've had plenty of time."

"An' for Beef to get back, too, him bein' yore head bully."

"I stopped you once, Sam." Hanlon was leaning forward, big red hands gripping the arms of his chair. "Let's stick to what I came for."

"Wait, Bruce." McGee was suddenly on his feet, looking over the railing and straight down to a deep hole in the creek twenty feet below. "That's it, as shore as hell!"

"That's what?" Hanlon bounced to his feet. "What in hell are you looking at, you old fool! I can't see!"

"Yeah, that's *it*, Bruce!"

AN ANGRY wildcat could not have clawed him any faster. Sam McGee's big right hand had shot up and down, catching him by the back of his fat red neck, giving him a furious push. By having both hands on the rail, Hanlon saved himself for a moment, bucking backward like a startled horse.

Releasing his grip, McGee struck one short blow, right to the side of the fat red jaw. Hanlon's feet slid, knees buckling. Before he could catch himself again he was down across the rail.

Sam McGee had him now. The big old fist struck one more blow, the ball of it a hammer coming down on the back of Hanlon's neck. In that second Salvation Sam McGee caught him by the back of the collar and the seat of the pants. With one heave he sent him tumbling over the rail, a huge, dazed bullfrog of a thing going down and into the creek with a wail and a big splash.

"An' that, Bruce," intoned McGee, "is yore answer. A little Sunday baptism might do that shriveled up soul of yores a heap of good."

McGee was whirling and ducking an instant later, facing the south end of the porch. A quick slap downward and a lightning upswing had filled his right hand with a cocked Peacemaker. His mean old eyes were now on the big, wide-staring figure that was Beef Blodgett. There was a startled gasp, Blodgett's hands jerking up, shoulder-high.

"Don't — shoot — me, McGee," he rasped. "The sheriff's—right behind you, you damned old fool."

"He ain't lyin', Sam." Henry Horsely's voice was a furious rasping from the end of the porch behind the old outlaw. "There's a double-barreled shotgun aimed right at yore back an' both hammers cocked. Drop that gun, if you want to be around some."

CHAPTER SIX

Too Many Sky-Pilots!

THE PLAY was fast and furious. Salvation Sam McGee fired a quick glance back over his shoulder. The sheriff was standing there, left shoulder jammed against the corner of the porch, a sawed-off shotgun in his fat hands. A man like Henry Horsely would kill with sheer nervousness, his fiddling fingers pulling triggers without knowing they were pulling them.

Beef Blodgett was standing where he had stopped, scared also. Beyond him, snorting like a bull, Bruce Hanlon was climbing the bank of the creek, madder than forty wet fighting cocks.

Blodgett found his voice, a jerk of quick words to the sheriff. "Don't kill 'im! He's worth things alive, Hank. *Nothin' dead.*"

Knowing he had Blodgett stopped and too scared to move, McGee shot another glance at the sheriff. Instantly he saw the difference between living and dying. In spite of what he had said, the slow-thinking, slow-acting Horsely had not yet cocked either big hammer on the shotgun. Sam McGee spoke, voice cold, deadly.

"Yuh axed for it, Hank!" Like something suddenly falling apart, he hit the floor of the porch on one knee. As he dropped the old Peacemaker in his right hand roared, the second Peacemaker flying into his left hand. "Never try bluffin' me till yuh cock yore gun!"

A yell lifted from the sheriff, the shotgun falling from his big hands. Staggering backward, blood flying from his shattered right elbow, he tripped and fell, flat on his back. Before he could jerk to his feet McGee was up, turned, his back now to the doorway of the little house, the grin of a devil on his long face.

"Stay where yuh are, Hank!" he barked. "Yuh, too, Beef! An' yuh, yuh snortin' damn elephant," he was glaring at Hanlon, "just come right on up an' join the party!"

"I'm shot!" wailed the sheriff. "Help! Help, everybody! He's shot down the sheriff of Painted Rock!"

McGee heard people running, but he was still pulling Blodgett and Hanlon toward him as if his deadly old Peacemakers were magnets. There was no need to bark at them. Each of them knew he would shoot them down if they made one false step. Getting them on the porch and sliding along the rail in front of him, he spoke again.

"Help that big cow up from there," he jerked his head toward the sheriff, "an' we'll get agoin'. Just remember to yore dyin' day that it was yuh who started all this, Bruce. Yuh mighta gone on with yore robbin' an' stealin' up an' down the Border country without my sayin' a word, but a lot of things are over now. Like in a good game of poker, there ain't no friendship here."

"Gawd A'mighty, stop 'im!" The sheriff was wailing a few moments later, on his feet now, Blodgett at his right side, Hanlon at his left. McGee had holstered one six-shooter and picked up the shotgun. "I don't know what this ol' devil aims to do, but we was tryin' to 'rest 'im for robbin' a train 'way up in Wyomin' not long ago."

HANLON cursed him from the side of his mouth, face the color of a lemon now. People were rushing up from everywhere, a score in the rapidly gathering crowd ready to do anything Bruce Hanlon or Beef Blodgett might tell them to do. Right now it was too dangerous for anything. Salvation Sam McGee was right behind them, keeping close, hammers on the shotgun cocked, the muzzle of the weapon gouging them in the back when they threatened to stop or turn.

The Sunday quiet of Painted Rock was gone, a growing uproar beginning to fill

the air. No one had ever seen anything like this in Painted Rock. One man was as good as taking the town by the ears and setting it back on its heels. He had the sheriff and two of Painted Rock's best-known citizens as good as spitted on the end of that hellish shotgun, stumbling them along so close to them the crowd didn't dare to rush him.

"Sam McGee robbed that Wyomin' train, I tell yuh!" Horsely was still yelling in spite of Hanlon's and Blodgett's low cursing. "Ever'body read about it in the papers! There's ten thousan' dollars reward on him!"

"Ten thousan' dollars!" The words lifted as a groan from the yet-growing crowd. The very thought of reward money to a mob like this was always as exciting as the smell of hot blood to hungry wolves. "Ten thousan' dollars!"

"Gorsh, boys, that's money!"

"Keep back, yuh fools!" yelled McGee. "Don't make me blast all three of 'em. Yo've still got yore chance to take me. I ain't goin' nowhere. Take yore time."

The attempted bank robbery had been nothing like this. Every man and every woman in Painted Rock now seemed to be scurrying forward, the din of voices becoming a roar. Keeping his prisoners in front of him, McGee led the wild parade up the street.

There was no stopping. At the head of the street he marched his prisoners up the steps to the porch of the jail. Most of the mob stopped, ganged up against the steps and the edge of the porch. A string of men going right and left hurried on to the rear of the jail. Not with ten thousand dollars reward money in the air for the men or man who would take it.

Herding his prisoners on inside, McGee kicked the door closed with his heel. Standing the sheriff's shotgun against the door, he threw a couple of steel latches in place, gold teeth glinting, his smile now as innocent looking as a monk's.

"An' now I take yore hardware, gents," he intoned. "Didn't wanta do this, but yuh fellas just had to have it like this. This is goin' to be the biggest hoss laugh yuh fellas ever heard 'fore we're done with it. Just stand purty an' nobody'll get hurt. Plum foolish of yuh to go get yore arm broke, Hank, but, then, yuh allus was kinda foolish, settin' here on that big fat tail of yores thinkin' the public was gonna keep on feedin' yuh for life."

He searched them one at a time, knowing he was being watched from the windows. Taking hidden six-shooters from both Hanlon and Blodgett, he flung them on the floor behind him. Keeping his Peacemaker against Bruce Hanlon's broad back, he forced him to unbuckle the sheriff's heavy belts and let them drop to the floor.

A minute later he was herding them back inside the corridor of the jail and into the first cell to his right, the sheriff cursing again and beginning to wail for a doctor. McGee fired a shot slanted at the steel floor, the bullet splattering lead down the corridor to the locked backdoor, startling him to silence.

"IT'S kinda bad, fellas." He was grinning at them through the stout bars of the cell door a few moments later, his voice low. "Yuh got too smart for yore britches. Me, now, I'd never cook up a job to rob a bank in my own town, or right on my own doorstep, not when there's so many all 'round for the takin'. An' if I robbed one anywhere I'd have real men behind me—or do my job alone.

"Yore brother made a sucker outa yuh, Beef." He grinned. "You've been an awful damn fool, too. Yuh with that black fingernail an' yore fancy for red-toed boots. Such markin's are bad in a holdup. They follow hell outa a man. Worse yet when the jobs yo've been doin' down here won't let yuh have what's called an alibi. Bruce bein' a lawyer can tell yuh all about

important things like that-there, Beef."

He left them with that, grinning that innocent monk's smile. Hanlon and Blodgett were staring, words now refusing to come to them. The sheriff had slumped on the side of a bunk moaning like a man going mad with pain.

In the doorway of the corridor McGee stopped, a Peacemaker now filling each hand as he glanced at the windows of the office. Before a cat could lick its whiskers he fired four shots, bullets splattering into the plaster above the end windows and the two facing the porch. Like startled herds of sheep, yells and curses lifting, the crowds fell back outside. Before men could return he had closed the inside iron shutters over the windows, darkening the room.

"An' now I'm wonderin'," he growled, picking up the sawed-off shotgun he had left against the front door, "just how long it's goin' to take for the rest of this thing to come through an' sorter finish pinnin' back the ears of this here Painted Rock."

"Open that door, McGee." They were yelling for him out there now, the mob milling as mobs always milled. "Open that damn door an' come out!"

"To the porch, anyhow!" bawled another voice even further back and safer than the first. "There ain't a chance in hell of yuh or anybody else to get away from this gang. We've got this whole damn jail surrounded."

"An' yuh keep it that way." To their surprise, Salvation Sam McGee had suddenly swung open the door, the devil standing there with that deadly sawed-off, the hammers cocked, the wide, untroubled grin on his long face. "I ain't goin' nowhere. There's a reward to be collected, ten whole thousan' dollars, the papers say, an' somebody's shore goin' to get it in this town. Now keep yore shirts on. Ain't a damn one of yuh got guts enough to ram his belly up to me—an' yuh know it."

"Rush 'im!" bawled a big red-headed man, hands on his knees and stooped into a crouch at the lower side of the crowd. "Rush 'im!"

"Why don't yuh try it, leader of men?" McGee had walked right on to the edge of the porch. The old shotgun roared now, the muzzle suddenly swung straight skyward. In a moment buckshot fired high in the air was falling like rain on the crowd, men falling back and all over

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themselves. "Quiet! Stand an' lis'en to a man when he talks to yuh, an' keep yore bullies quiet. Here comes Preacher Charley Smith with some of the decent folks in this town behind 'im."

Everybody turned and stared, a sudden, wondering hush gripping the entire town. Everybody was staring at Preacher Smith, coming from eastward. A tall, thin man in black with iron-gray hair, there was not less than thirty grim-faced men and women behind him.

In each hand Smith carried a stout canvas sack with gold lettering on the side of it. Behind him walked a man carrying two more sacks just like them. At the moment no one in front of the jail seemed to realize that Smith and the crowd were coming from the direction of Bruce Hanlon's big adobe house.

"Amazing, Brother McGee, amazing!" The preacher and the man behind him came on up the steps, dropping their sacks on the porch. "The letter you slipped in the contribution box this morning simply addled me, and yet all of us should have suspected from the beginning. Every paper carrying the story of that Wyoming train robbery said the bandit's nail on the right forefinger was as black as wagon paint.

"They also said that the toes of his boots were tipped with red leather in the design of arrowheads. We also had clear descriptions of the money sacks, and they tally. Remembering that as you pointed out in your letter, we have been to Mr. Bruce Hanlon's house.

"In those sacks are thirty-one thousand and nine hundred dollars. There is yet fifty thousand dollars short, but we have all the evidence in the world we need to convince anyone that Mr. Blodgett robbed that train. We found two of the sacks under the bed where he sleeps. The other two were under Mr. Hanlon's."

McGee was beginning that slow smile. "It looks like yuh an' yore little crowd collects that reward money."

"But you're the one who solved all this—"

"Thinkin', maybe," McGee looked up at the sky and grinned, "it'd be just about enough to re-roof an' repair that church yuh run from top to bottom, parson. Bein' free from sin in my older years, I'm wishin' yuh a whole lot of luck in collectin', an' with that money yo've got in them sacks yuh might just hang on to ten thousand of it. Mr. Blodgett won't mind. He'll be doin' about twenty years in the pen, but yuh mark my word, all yuh dudes!"

He lifted his voice, looking at all the crowd now. "Beef Blodgett will do a lot of talkin' 'fore he leaves Painted Rock, an' somethin' tells me his brother, Bruce Hanlon, is goin' away for a long spell, too—along with Sheriff Hank Horsely for tryin' to rob our little bank last Thursday mornin'."

Everybody was silent and staring. With a rolling voice he was letting them have it, telling them things they had actually long known but did not dare say about Bruce Hanlon and the sheriff. They were cheering him before he was through.

Leaving everything to the preacher and his crowd, he headed down the street. Back at his little house he put the old Peacemakers in the dresser drawer. On the porch in the rocker he sat there smiling now and then. Once he lifted his right hand and looked carefully at the nail of his forefinger.

"Queer the preacher would think of black wagon paint," he chuckled. "Took till this morning' to scrub the last trace off, an' nobody's ever goin' to find them fancy boots Beef throwed away an' I patched an' polished up. They're full of rocks an' in the bottom of a river 'way up yonder in Wyomin'. I guess Painted Rock's gonna be right peaceful after all."

THE END

HELL-ON-THE-CLAW

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

One thousand pounds of black fury was bound up in the thick, tough bear-hide of Mukwa, hungrily awaiting battle against half a ton of savage grizzly dynamite—to win or lose the kingship of all that rich northwest timber domain!

MUKWA, the big bear, sat on his haunches and blinked his eyes at the strengthening sunlight, wrinkling his nose as he made soft whimpering sounds.

Although there was heavy snow around his home range, in the craglands, large

Mukwa reared, and the grizzly charged in.

bare patches of ground and sprouting grass showed. Water was dripping, tinkling, and early migratory birds were already in the thickets.

Old Mukwa rubbed his gaunt belly with a massive forepaw. His hibernation period was over. He leaned forward and touched a rotted windfall pine log with the tips of his long, sharply curved claws. They were not the claws of a silver-tip grizzly. He weighed more than the biggest grizzly recorded in this mountain zone of Alberta.

Although no forest ranger or trapper could account for his presence here, Mukwa was definitely of the big Kodiak species.

He felt the log to see that it was thawed out, and then began to feed in earnest on the grubs and larvae.

On a small plateau below, although he could not definitely identify them, he saw a group of feeding bighorn sheep. His sight was by no means good. And he was not specially interested in sheep.

For his first feed he would wander down to the lower draws and dig for roots of skunk cabbage. Grunting, he got to all fours, slid down a slope, then ambled on with that swaying, swaggering gait that marked him as the true monarch of all this wild mountain wilderness range.

MUKWA paid no attention to squirrels which scampered across his path, but shortly he brought up to a sharp halt. His muscles and nerve fibers quivered as from a point just ahead there came the vicious snarls of a mountain lioness.

Mukwa had no fear of any creature in the wilds, but more than once he had given right-of-way to a small striped skunk, though not through fear. Discretion played its part in such cases.

Mukwa could not wholly disregard Acheeta, the cougar, and her kind, for they were among the most powerful of all killers.

Today, surprised in the act of covering up the remains of a partly-eaten recent kill, Acheeta snarled and screeched as she whirled to face the big brown monster. She was in no condition for battle, but she was in condition to bluff.

Her long black-tipped tail weaved and twitched from side to side as she arched her back and grimaced at Mukwa, who had reared to his full height.

Had he been hungry, he might have counter-challenged with roars that would have set the ground to trembling. He champed his jaws until the foam dropped in solid blobs. He dropped lightly to all fours and swaggered on, giving Acheeta and her kill a wide berth.

Her snarls gave him no concern. His nose was quivering. He could tang the fresh sweet scent of running water and vegetation to his liking. Shortly, at a small, sun-splashed area, he was in swift, vigorous action, as he dug down to the roots of his choice.

Now he sat on his haunches chewing the semi-bitter roots. Then he whirled. His piggy eyes blinked savagely as out of a wild fruit thicket, her twin cubs trailing, emerged a large she grizzly. She, too, had come down to dig for roots.

Mukwa moaned a warning, but old Wan, the mother bear, reared and bellowed back counter-warnings. She rose to her full height. Mukwa reared to his own full stature, a towering behemoth, bigger than any bear in the entire mountain country.

Wan's nose quivered. Ordinarily she felt no twinge of fear for any of the wild creatures. No kingly silvertip male dared even approach her as she reared her cubs. She was a fighter who demanded respect.

But none of her roars, nor the flailing of her huge paws disturbed Mukwa. He blinked at her and champed his great slobbering jaws, now and then giving forth low moans. Wan clacked her great tusks and dropped to all fours.

Mukwa had resumed his digging. As Wan drove her tiny cub on ahead of her into the thicket, she snarled and grumbled, but Mukwa continued to dig and feed.

When he was done, he rolled on his haunches and moved to drink lightly at a catch-basin nearby. He turned to wander on, to climb to a warm slab of rock, there to spread himself and rest.

THE DAYS and nights passed. Mukwa began to feel the sharp pangs of hunger. He moved about his range, a silent creature. This morning, he had come down close to the huge stands of pine and spruce timber. It was often at the fringes of such belts, in the undergrowth, that deer hid their young.

He was standing, a forepaw tucked up, his great head cocked on one side listening to strange clacking sounds, when a fickle spring wind brought the dread tang of man creatures.

Mukwa could not know that loggers had moved up into the pine timber to cut. He had had little to do with man and his kind. Whenever he whiffed their scent, he turned away, but today, blended with the man scent, was that most inviting of all smells—the tang of horses.

Swampers of the logging outfit had their teams up in camp near the stand, ready to snake out the logs to skidways. And Mukwa's belly growled as the tantalizing scent freshened.

He moved in closer, though with greater caution. Now and then he sniffed the acrid tang of wood smoke. He heard the clang of a bell and the jangle of metal. These sounds were not far off, and not too alarmingly attended by the scent of man.

Mukwa inched forward, pushing gently through dense undergrowth. Suddenly he halted, lowering his massive head. He saw ahead, in a small clearing, two horses —one a mare, the other a foal a week or two old.

Mukwa's body weaved from side to side, but he made no movement of his huge paws. There was still a sharp tang of the man creatures at every quarter. Instinctively Mukwa sensed that man was a creature to be respected. Yet his great appetite held him here as hunger mounted in his brain.

He was turning to begin his stalk of the foal. He pushed through a fringe of wild chokecherry scrub. He half-turned again, when suddenly he heard a sharp scream.

He whirled inside, almost to the clear. His huge tusks clacked as he rose and he blinked his eyes at the grim drama ahead. The foal was down. On its back crouched Acheeta, the lioness.

THE FOAL subsided. But now there was a wild jangling of the bell about the mare's neck. Screaming, the little bay wheeled and charged. As she neared the lioness, she whirled and lashed out with a speed and savagery which not even the lightning-like Acheeta could beat.

The big cat was struck. Mukwa's jaws champed as he weaved his huge body from side to side. Acheeta limped as she moved about to circle around the frenzied mare.

When she sprang, her timing was off. The mare was swifter. She whirled, reared, and suddenly chopped down. Acheeta attempted to move her body out of range of those striking forehoofs. Though she managed to get clear, she was moving sluggishly as she bounded to the willow thicket.

Head high, the mare screamed piercingly. She now shook her head savagely from side to side.

Mukwa blinked his eyes. He could, with one swift blow of a forepaw, have smashed her neck to a pulp. Yet he stood, transfixed, while the mare poured out her cries, stomped her hoofs.

Her foal was dead.

Suddenly the wind shifted again. The mare wheeled. She had caught the great bear's scent. Screaming, she half reared, spun, and galloped off.

For some time Mukwa listened to the pound of her hoofs. Then he dropped to all fours and moved on through the fruit and willow thicket.

When he struck the fresh lion sign, he swung his head and coughed out a ponderous roar.

Acheeta stirred in the nearby underbrush. She gave out no counter challenge. She was in no condition to do so. Besides, up in the rocky craglands, at her den, there were five kittens. Snarling softly, she flicked her long tail and whirled, limping off, as Mukwa's great form moved toward her.

The big brown king moved cautiously along the edge of the thicket. He took plenty of time, for Mukwa was wise, instinctively wise. When at last he reached a spot close to the slain foal, he rose to search air for danger sign at every quarter before moving in.

His jaws now clamped powerfully on the colt's neck. His head rose and with it came the foal's limp body, almost clear of the ground. Mukwa was starting to heave backward when he heard the scream of the foal's mother near the big timber. He froze momentarily, then shifted his jaw hold. Grunting, he turned.

Save that the rear hoofs dragged, the foal was almost entirely free of the ground as Mukwa moved back toward the uplands. Only now and then did the great one stop to rest. At the last call of the mare, the man scent had sharpened.

Mukwa moved on, climbing, dragging, tugging, until at last he found a gully high in the craglands where he laid his kill down.

For a few moments he cricled the area, sniffing sharply. He made sharp little sounds as he detected sharpening man scent.

Mukwa's massive jaws choff-choffed as he ate. This was his first feed of the season.

Suddenly he started. He could hear strange sounds. They were the voice sounds of man creatures. Then came the baying of wolf-like creatures.

Two great hybrid wolf-dogs broke from a nearby thicket. Their calls rang sharply in Mukwa's ear. They were swift and rushed toward him. He half rose and flailed his forepaws with a speed that completely surprised one dog.

Mukwa sent this one flying many feet. As it struggled to its feet, it had lost its zest for battle, and now, yelping the other hybrid whirled, loping back into the thicket.

The big brown monarch wheeled. The scent of man was sharp, alarming. Shortly, Mukwa was weaving his way up tortuous old sheep trails, up through gullies, over rimrock, into other gullies. Down below the loggers came to a halt by the carcass of the foal.

BIG Lan Ferguson's brows were sharply furrowed as he dropped to a knee to examine the tracks.

"Lion, my foot!" he bellowed. "Come look at these tracks. It's the old brownie, for sure, like I told you, Nils."

Nils Larson, the logger boss, joined his chief swamper. He made sharp clicking sounds with his tongue against his teeth, measuring with practiced eye the nature and size of Mukwa's tracks.

"I thought it was just a story, Lan," he said gruffly. "Now I can see for myself—these ain't silver-tip tracks. You can tell by the size, an' by the claw marks. Didn't we see lion sign down below there at the clearin'?"

Lan Ferguson got to his feet and gave a sharp hitch to the belt of his mackinaw pants. He cast a sharp glance at the big boss whose face was still clouded with a puzzled expression.

"Well?" Lan said. "What now? We've just started our cut. This big brown feller won't stop at one horse, now that he's tasted horseflesh."

"I'm thinkin' of that," Larson answered. "But I don't right know what to do. We should organize a huntin' party, but it might take days to locate him. Anyhow, we haven't got enough high-powered rifles."

Larson turned to study the great tracks of Mukwa.

A crippled dog came whining up to lick his hand. Nils swung around.

"You take over, Lan," he said. "I'll handle the big feller. It won't be safe for the horses, or for the men, while the big bear remains alive. One day some logger'll come across him an' try to drop him with a .30-30. He'll only wound him, an'—" He broke off, shrugging significantly.

These men of the mountain timber country knew a lot about the big bears.

"I'll head back to camp an' get my high-power, Lan," Larson said gruffly. "Don't say too much about what we discovered. Let the boys think it was a lion got the foal, huh?"

"Okay, boss, but watch your step. You'll have to keep an eye out, too, for mammy grizzlies with cubs. They can be dynamite."

"I'll be careful, Lan."

Larson strode off down the slope, heading with long-legged strides for camp, leaving Lan Ferguson to bring in the dogs.

The big logger boss tried to draw up some plan for the hunt. Finally he shrugged. There could be no set blueprint for tracking down old Mukwa. He had a cunning, a wisdom, a power that would be difficult to match.

UP BETWEEN the higher ridges, old Mukwa champed his great jaws. He was in an ugly mood. Every now and then he swiped savagely at a windfall log, shattering the punk over a wide area.

He climbed up an old mud and rock slide to a narrow plateau. Here he sniffed sharply as he circled the area. The tang of sheep scent was fresh, strong. Mukwa grunted. He was satisfied with this vantage point. To the easterly end of the plateau were huge boulders lodged against a stout fringe of tough scrub brush.

He wandered in between the boulders to screen his massive body. From this point he could see the lower ranges and the valleys beyond. He could also observe the upper slopes.

Now he began to hunt. He dug down into a marmot den and slavered as he swallowed the morsels of food which would sustain him for the time being.

Two days and nights dragged by. Mukwa had exhausted the supply of rodents and grubs in the battered windfall logs.

He circled back from the plateau, climbed over an almost naked rock, moving along a screened ledge. He traveled thus for a mile or more before he hit a slide gully and scrambled down.

He was traveling an old game trail toward sunset when he heard the thump of hoofbeats. He half reared as a young bull elk, nostrils flared, eyes wide, came staggering up the trail.

As the young bull attempted to rear, whirl, and bypass the monster in his path, Mukwa rushed, reared, and struck. A single blow from his massive right forepaw killed the elk before he struck the ground in a twisted heap.

Mukwa swayed from side to side. He whirled and slashed at the elk's throat with his strong tusks. He bit savagely and began his feast.

His pleasure was short-lived. A deep guttural roar startled him. He rose then, blinking, as a huge silvertip grizzly male came whirling around a bend in the old game trail. He had been on the trail of

the young bull, ready to lunge to the kill, when suddenly the elk had jumped, startled by some alarming scent.

Mukwa rose to his full height, choffing his jaws, clacking his great tusks as his body weaved.

The big grizzly chieftain bellowed. He was no coward. He came in, head low, coughing, roaring.

Mukwa dropped to all fours, hopped nimbly over his kill, and took his stand. Now his own battle roars were caught and echoed by the slopes.

They were sounds that reached the hearing of Nils Larson. He stopped and cocked his head, listening to two distinct series of bear voice sounds—horrible sounds of battle.

"This might be my only chance," he told himself. He started to climb. Above, two of the most savage creatures of all the wilderness were challenging each other. It was possible that shortly they would clash in battle.

Nils Larson was an experienced hunter, yet he continued to shudder as he pulled himself up over a ledge onto the game trail where he had glimpsed the great tracks of Mukwa. Larson cast a sharp glance down at a stand of pine below, measuring the distance.

He examined his rifle, saw there was a live cartridge in the breech. He moved the catch off safety, then started forward, only to be halted as he heard the most terrific bellowing he had ever heard.

MUKWA had rushed and struck. Great tusks ripped at the hair and skin of his throat. His powerful right forepaw had struck his opponent a glancing blow across the nigh shoulder. Blood sopped into the silvertip's coat as he recovered, shaking his huge head.

Heads low, they weaved from side to side, their small eyes red, blood-shot, the foam flecking from their jaws like heavy snow.

The grizzly whirled as if to turn. Then he swung and reared. He drove in smashing with first one and then the other forepaw. Mukwa was rocked back. He was on his rump, leaning backward.

The grizzly drove hard. Jaws agape, he lunged to strike, to slash, but Mukwa, the monster brown king, hurled his huge shape to one side, as easily as a boxer sidestepping an attack.

He rolled on his rump, whirled and caught his opponent. The sounds of the smashing blows reached the man creature. Nils Larson swallowed sharply. His eyes bugged as he saw the two great forms rolling, biting, smashing.

He raised his rifle, but could not be sure of a vulnerable spot in any body. He was inclined to shoot, take a chance on breaking a bone. But the action below was too swift, too baffling. And it was too awe-inspiring.

He stood transfixed as he watched the battlers rise together, to drive with open jaws. He saw the towering Mukwa raise a hind paw and drive it into the other's belly. Larson winced, for he knew the sharpness and the power of those terrible claws.

The silvertip dropped to all fours. He roared with pain and anger. He was not spent by any means. He weighed eight or nine hundred pounds, but Mukwa outweighed him by at least three hundred.

Larson raised his rifle. He was slowly sighting when Mukwa rushed. The great brown king half rose and twisted his body as he drove a smashing blow to the grizzly's nigh shoulder.

The watching man felt his knees quiver and buckle.

Again Mukwa struck. The grizzly attempted to whirl inside, to slash at that great exposed throat, but Mukwa's speed was too great. The big one eased his bulk to one side, feinting. He swung and smashed again.

The grizzly was down on his knees.

Larson's finger was taking in first pressure on the trigger as Mukwa rushed and struck again.

The impact was terrible, soggy.

Roaring, the grizzly spilled out over the rim to go crashing on down the rock-strewn slope to a broken canyon bottom below.

MUKWA reared, then whirled. He bellowed a roar from his cavernous throat as the full fresh tang of the man scent struck his nostrils. He was dropping to rush, when a clap of terrible thunder blasted with a gush of gun flame.

Mukwa staggered back a step or two, whirled to go toppling over the rim in the tracks of his defeated opponent.

Larson tightened his mouth. It had been his most terrific experience. He would have a great story for the boys in camp. Jerking the bolt action of his rifle, he moved forward to find an easy slope down to the canyon below.

Shortly, the man creature was striding forward. There, off right, lay the huge dead form of the silvertip, and off to the left, seemingly lodged in stout willow scrub, sprawled the biggest of all bears, old Mukwa.

Larson grinned. He hooked his rifle in the crook of his right elbow and strode forward. Mukwa lay in a grotesquely bunched formation, crouched, ready to spring. "Mebbeso had fight in him even as he passed out," Larson surmised.

His eyes glinted as he appraised the huge, handsome form. He was still speculating, estimating length and weight when suddenly, as if thunder had erupted from the ground, Mukwa whirled, roaring.

Larson wheeled away instinctively as Mukwa came up slashing. He was almost sickened by the blow in his right wrist, a glancing, clawing blow which sent his rifle clattering to the rocks. He himself reeled headlong into the scrub brush.

As the rifle crashed, its trigger was sprung. Mukwa reeled back. The old warrior's back hair was soaked with blood. Blood trickled from a corner of his great mouth, turning the foam at his jaws a reddish brown color as it dropped to earth.

Now he whirled, catching the sounds of the man creature as he stumbled on through the brush. Roaring, Mukwa swung and crashed through the thicket. Larson had scrambled up the far bank. He was at the pines already.

Now he clung to the tree bole with his legs and with his crooked damaged arm, a heavy Colt .45 gripped firmly in his left hand.

Larson sighted and pulled. He saw that great head shake. Mukwa roared. He was hit. Down on all fours, he was starting to charge when Larson pulled again and again.

Mukwa wheeled. That thunder was strange to him. Each time it crashed he was hurt. Moaning, he swung and ambled on into a deeper thicket. The ways of man were strange. His experience with them limited.

Shortly he had ambled on to a small stream into which he plunged, sinking, to let the ice-cold water bring surcease to his pain.

The following morning, high up on rimrock, Mukwa stirred and blinked. His shoulder was stiff, where a bullet had cut into muscle. He came slowly to his haunches, to blink on down across the nearest valley. Suddenly he started as he glimpsed a moving object which he could not identify, until the soft southwest wind brought him the man scent.

Snarling, he reared to his full height. Mouth agape, he flailed air with his paws, roaring a challenge to that moving form. Poised thus, Mukwa bellowed his warnings. He stood in all his glory, the glory of a majesty he intended to retain.

Through the split in the rocks he could see them circling around to flank him.

Skinner John Thorn played with human lives as he played with the pasteboards that were his stock in trade—from the bottom of the deck . . . Until, one red night in Tres Cruces, he dealt a stacked hand against a smiling, red-headed queen of diamonds, and rode off with a jackpot—of straight-shooting, hard-riding possemen hot on his trail!

• • RIDE WIDE OF

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Hard-Hitting Novel of Gunplay on the Border

By.

ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

CHAPTER ONE

Killer in Town

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That night the bluff was only a steely-gray spangled with moonlight. It was too far to see the four mounted riders at the edge of the cliff. But the riders could see the town clearly, a glitter of lights sprawled along the river below, with a pillar of fire blazing away in the center.

The four were mounted on mules, three men and a woman. The only saddle in the lot was used by the woman, no great bargain at that, for she was encumbered by a long green velvet dress. Still, it was better than riding a bare backbone. Two of the men were already squirming with discomfort.

The third man, a big, lank fellow in rough clothing, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, spoke.

"I didn't like the damn' town anyhow. I hope the whole shebang burns down."

A small, nattily-dressed man laughed.

• • RIDE WIDE OF TRES CRUCES! • •

Hard-Hitting Novel of Gunplay on the Border

By.

ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

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TRES CRUCES! • •

"Sour grapes! Sour grapes!" he cried, in a high, shrill voice. "I liked it. It was so full of stupid people. Not one in fifty could spot a sleeve card with your cuffs turned up. The mutton heads ran thick and deep in Lobo."

The lank man, who answered to the name of Skinner John Thorn, laughed quietly. "Not too muttonheaded to know your color." He blew ashes off his cigarette and kneed his mule around away from the bluff. "We might's well start over the pass now."

"Wait a moment." It was the woman speaking, her face as set and cold as the rock face of the bluff. "You are sure, Thorn, that there is no other way than the high pass?"

Thorn scowled at her. "Shore, there's another way. A nice easy road lined with gun barrels. I told you, you can take the wagon and three of the mules and run it. But me for the high pass. Up here we won't need the guns we haven't got. We just need guts." He broke off, eyeing his three companions. To him, bred to the roughest country, it would be nothing. To them, plain hell. They'd be chains dragging him back. But they were companions in trouble. "We need guts and luck," he growled. "Follow me."

Slowly, he led them up toward the timberline.

THORN was not amused by the situation. Nor were any of the others, but he figured that they deserved it. For himself, it was just his luck that was wrong. He thought of his grandfather's creed, that a man made his own luck. But he didn't take it seriously. Why, what had he done to deserve being shown the road out of town with a rifle barrel?

He'd come in peaceably, the morning before—driving his four-mule team at an easy trot, the empty wagon rattling behind. Empty except for a bedroll, a worn saddle, a rifle, and a small sack of provisions. Wheeling into the sprawling town of Lobo in a cloud of gray dust.

He was perched up on the wagon box, long-legged, with broad, rawboned shoulders and a craggy, badly-shaven face. It was topped by a shapeless hat that hid his tawny hair. The big wooden handle of a Colt .45 arched up from his waist.

He was no different from a thousand such men who roamed the West in search of work, play, gambling in cards or land or gold; men who called no place their own, who roamed with their eyes continually flicking about, searching for—anything. Anything that might come. Such men might rustle cattle, if the price were right, or if gold talk was jabbered around, they might get that golden gleam in their eyes and race after the thinnest rumor.

Had there been women, more would have settled. Perhaps their real goal was women. But women were rare. Land was free to a man who would plow it or post a range. Money rolled freely as water, and working jobs were only for men who were down on their luck.

John Thorn had left his father's homestead one night when the moon was high and five thousand head came moaning and bawling north for Dodge. The trail boss had taken one look at the tow-headed kid of fourteen, at the rifle tied to his saddle horn.

"Kin you ride and shoot?"

Young Thorn had nodded.

"Then ride point up thar with Charley Gibbs."

It was simple as that. A horse, some sort of firearm, a bag of flour and one of coffee beans, an empty tomato can—that was the equipment required. A man needed money for cartridges and fun.

That was sixteen years ago, and it had not changed. Thorn had acquired a four-mule team and a wagon, but they did not weight him down. Twice already they had been put up as security for poker

chips, and he was mildly surprised that they had not fallen victim to a straight that bucked a flush. Indeed, that was how they had come into his life.

He liked mules, and knew them well. If John Thorn had a talent, it was flicking a blacksnake, be there four or twenty-four longears in front of him. His nickname of "Skinner" had nothing to do with buffalo hunting, in which he had also engaged, but in bringing creaking ore wagons from the Bixby diggings to the smelter.

So he entered Lobo with four mules and a wagon, and a vague plan of carting flour or beans out to the mine camps that were dotted through the Puma Range.

He tied them in front of a saloon, stretched his legs for a moment before entering. He fished in his pockets and found he had all of six bits in cash. That pleased him. He'd had no occasion to delve for cash in some days, and had reckoned his liquid assets as being somewhat less. He could have a whiskey now, a beer to wash it down with, and still enough left for a meal.

HE WENT into the bar, lazy with the warmth of spring. The bartender was swishing a cloth over the bar. He looked up at the newcomer without interest.

"Howdy," he mumbled.

"Howdy," Thorn mumbled back. "Shot and a beer."

The bartender looked him over, found his appearance unimpressive. "Cash in advance."

Thorn flipped a quarter on the bar. He was used to being treated with suspicion in strange towns. Sometimes a foot-loose man drank first and promised pay when his money came through. Thorn had done that himself, and had always been glad he could handle his gun well.

He gulped the whiskey down and sipped the foam off a beer while the bartender cornered his money and slid back a dime of change. Then he was free to lounge against the bar, sip his beer, and glance over the half-dozen idlers in the saloon. The free lunch caught his eye and he moved over next to it. With a brusque wave of his rawboned hand he ordered the flies to share and share alike.

It was ten minutes later that a vigorous pair of boots came tromping through the open doorway. Clicking heels, the step of a man with too much pep for a warm day in May. Thorn turned idly.

The newcomer was a big man dressed in a fine gray suit, grinning, nodding to every man in the bar in a jerky way that shook the black curls of hair coming out from under his hat. "Mornin', boys!" he called out.

"Mornin', Jay!" they chorused back at him. Thorn alone said nothing, just regarded the handsome, affable man with a measuring gray glance. Younger than Thorn, a sight handsomer, and probably eight hundred times as rich. But he ordered whiskey and beer as Thorn had, and gulped it down with the same amount of relish. He turned toward Thorn.

"I guess you're the one I want to palaver with, if you own the mules and wagon out front," he said grinning.

Thorn shrugged and hauled his beer over next to him.

"I'm Jay Thebold, partner with my brother in the Thebold Hauling Company."

Thorn smiled. "I'm John Thorn, they call me 'Skinner,' partner with nobody in nothin'."

Thebold's grin flicked off for a moment, as though he sensed something uncooperative in Thorn's voice. But he let it pass.

"I thought maybe you'd like to come in with us," he said, still smiling. "We pay good wages."

Thorn sipped his beer, eyeing the man

over the rim of the glass. He did not, at the moment, want wages. He wanted to take a fling all on his own. "I think I'll kind of lone wolf it for a while," he said, his voice coming hollowly out from the inside of the glass.

Thebold's face took on a pained expression. "You see, we can't afford to have anybody cut-pricing."

THORN set down the glass. "Yes, you can. If I can beat your rates you can afford to meet them." He wondered why he was saying that. Hell, he hadn't any idea how much people around Lobo would pay for hauling. But this Thebold was a little too handsome, a little too well-liked, and a little too successful. Thorn, who was none of those things, and did not wish to be, distrusted a man who shone as Thebold did. He figured the earth was green and fat with game. Why try to triumph over it, over other men? There was a casual plenty for all; why try to hog it?

"We don't have to cut our rates," Thebold answered in a low voice. "We offer any man with hauling equipment a chance to join us, to share the profits. But we don't like price cutting."

Thorn had heard that talk before, and he didn't like it. Further, he was annoyed by the youngster's handsomeness, and distrustful of it.

"You can go to hell," he said. "I'll cut throat all I want."

He should have known that Jay Thebold's shoulder breadth was not from a padded coat. Or his success from weak guts. A fist came chopping up, took Thorn's jaw and drove it back into his ears. Lights blazed through the saloon, and Thorn sat down. His spine caught the cuspidor and the copper bowl went jangling across the floor.

He rolled to his feet, backed a little, his big fists knotting and his long arms drawing up toward his chest. He smiled at the handsome face before him, beaming with the confidence of practically certain victory.

"You got yourself into a little fight, sonny," he whispered. Then he came forward, flat-footed, his left fist jabbing, testing. Thebold, with less art than vigor, flailed at him with both fists. Skinner Thorn smiled sadly as they chopped air. He jabbed until the man was too close to retreat.

Then he wheeled and a fist like a rock with a rawhide covering went out straight from the shoulder. He leaned until only his toes were touching the floor, lank muscles corded into steel ropes, and all the power generated in thirty hard-riding years sledged into Thebold's jaw.

The man was twisted, spun crashing out to the door jamb and he stopped against it, the wood edge chopping into his back as all his weight and speed threw him against it. He let out a howl of pain.

"Pore, pretty Thebold," Skinner Thorn laughed.

The taunt stirred him. He came off the door jamb like a mountain lion, flinging himself on his opponent with a shriek. Thorn laughed, for he loved a fighter, and he came running in, blasting both fists in wild swings. A fist caught Thorn's belly and doubled him. He rolled to the side, came up against the bar, panting.

Thebold, grimmacing with his own pain, raced toward him. Thorn kicked off the bar and launched himself behind his right fist. Thebold met it with his chin. A crack rang through the room. Jay Thebold's legs went out from under him and he landed heavily on the floor. He rolled over once and his body went limp.

Thorn rubbed his bruised jaw and belly. He went to the bar and finished his beer, then drank his opponent's, as though it were the spoils of combat.

"He was a pretty good fighter," he told the wide-eyed crowd that had clustered about.

CHAPTER TWO

Death Jackpot

IF LOBO had any claim to fame at all, it came from Madame Gwen's Palace, the best-appointed gambling house in the Pumas.

Skinner Thorn was a man with an eager ear for any man's talk, as long as it was either informative or amusing. He had often sworn that if he met a man who was both informative and musing, he'd partner with the fellow right off. In City Marshal Abe Green he met a man who was both, although the amusement ran dry awful quick. However, by then Skinner had heard the best anecdotes about The Palace and Madame Gwen.

"She's got exactly one pleasure in life, and that's beatin' men at poker. She just naturally hates men. She don't care how much the faro tables bring in, it's them private poker games gives her the real laughs. Why, she took a cow king, you might say, down to the last calf, and he went out in tears, her just a-laughin' away." Green pulled his straggly mustaches, screwed up his long face in pain when he spoke of Madame Gwen. Beyond doubt, he held little love for the woman.

"Does she deal a clean deck?" Thorn asked. They were squatting on the edge of the boardwalk in front of the marshal's office. Thorn rolled himself a cigarette and handed the bag of makings to the marshal.

"She uses every dirty trick knowed," Green said. "Stackin', markin', sleeve cards and false aces, shapes—" He trailed off.

Thorn grinned. "I'd like to play a hand with the lady," he murmured.

"You know how to cheat?" the marshal said.

"I have trouble in *not* cheatin'," Thorn said, shading the truth a little. To him, a game of cards could be played two ways —honestly, or with the dealer's sleeve cards wild. Usually he let the others decide which way it should be.

They sat there in silence for a while, as the humid gray of evening settled down over them. Thorn's mules were in the livery stable and the only problem before him was getting supper without money. He figured on eating at the free lunch counter in the Palace, as soon as he'd established credit there.

"You reckon Madame Gwen would pass out chips on my mules?" he said.

Abe Green nodded. "Tell her I said they're worth a thousand dollars. Nice mules." He smoked slowly at his cigarette, finally turned and stared at Thorn with biting green eyes. "Thorn, that place is goin' to fold like a cardboard palace one of these days. Us citizens is against such goin's on."

That was when Skinner Thorn found the marshal wasn't the bosom friend he'd always searched for. He hated people who imposed virtue on others. His vision of man was as a compact unit of one, able to meet all troubles by himself, and not bothering anybody else. He got up to leave.

"See you later," Green said hopefully.

"So long," Thorn said.

IT WAS dark when he entered the Palace. The place was fancy—cherry wood with mauve curtains and shining brass hanging lamps. Most of the people were well-dressed, although there was a sprinkling of prospectors and cowmen in levis and hickory shirts, the same as Thorn. He eased through the crowd to the bar and waited for one of the two bartenders to be idle. He waved him over.

"I'd like to see Madame Gwen."

"What for?" the bartender said, suspiciously.

"For chips on my property." He fixed a stern gray eye on the man. "I only got a couple thousand in cash."

He said that in a tone that made the lie convincing, in spite of his rough clothes. But the bartender had seen men in tatters pull gold pokes from their pockets, and he was not surprised. He nodded to a little man in sleek black clothes who came and joined them. The bartender whispered a few words to him.

The man turned a pale, narrow face to Thorn, smiled like a fox. "I'm Flick, house man. Roll 'long with me and we'll see Madame Gwen." He started off at a quick, feline walk toward the spread of faro tables in the rear of the gambling house. Thorn slouched along behind.

Flick turned back and grinned, showing long white teeth. "Just come to town?"

Thorn nodded.

"Oh," said the little gambler, and he laughed shrilly. "You'll see, you'll see!" He slithered through the men that were crowded around the gambling tables, stopped in a small open space between them. There stood a woman with a ramrod for a spine, a woman in green velvet that Thorn knew instantly was Madame Gwen.

Thorn's hand moved automatically toward his hat. With a quick effort of will he dropped it and rested his hand on his gun butt.

Madame Gwen was tall, a year or two younger than Thorn, with a pale fine-boned face made up of handsome planes, a straight nose and brown eyes half-hidden beneath heavy lids. Her hair was red. Thorn suspected that she was born with a somewhat more prosaic hair color, but it fitted her pale face and high-necked green dress well.

"He wants to back some chips with property," Flick said, grinning.

Her half-hidden brown gaze roved intently over Thorn, settled on his eyes. He met it, making them grin at her. "Mules," he said. "Marshal Green says they're worth a thousand dollars." He didn't want to end his speech to her with Green's recommendation. "My name's Skinner John Thorn," he said, half-smiling.

She did not smile. Her chin rose slightly. "I suppose you could say that just as easily if you didn't own a mule."

His grin widened. "Maybe I *don't* have any mules."

"But you do, Thorn. I know. Where do you want the chips? Faro?"

"No-o," he drawled. "I want to play poker with the famous Madame Gwen."

Her eyes opened slightly, but settled back down to the sultry, piercing stare. "Ah, yes. Flick, buy the sucker a drink. We'll start in fifteen minutes." She stood still as a statue as they moved off, her cold gaze moving easily from table to table, seeing everything and giving no one her attention.

Flick and Thorn went to the end of the bar. Thorn got his whiskey and beer. "She'll enjoy taking your money," Flick said, laughing. "I can see she don't like you already."

Thorn gulped his whiskey down. "Hell, I'm a pretty good card player myself. Suppose I just happen to hold the lucky cards?"

Flick sobered. "Oh," he said. "She wouldn't like that at all."

FLICK led him into a small room with gilt chairs and crimson drapes, a large round table in the center and a single gaudily-spangled lamp hanging over the table. They sat down and after a moment a third man came into the room. His clothes were good but unpressed, and they hung in folds on his fat body, as though his bulk had been greater when he bought the clothes. His skin was yellow, his eyes peered with bloodshot vacuity from the folds of skin around them.

"Mr. Hales," Flick said, pointing his cigarette toward the newcomer. "Promoter. Here's Skinner Thorn, Mr. Hales."

Hales shook his flabby chins in a curt nod. He saw that Thorn's look was questioning. "Land and cattle and claim promotion," he said in a deep, frog-like voice.

"And cards!" Flick laughed, showing his long white teeth.

Thorn rolled a cigarette with a gesture of irritation. The little gambler annoyed him. And Hales was no prize. Madame Gwen appeared hen, striding through the doorway with a swish of skirts. The three of them creaked half-way to a standing position until she was seated.

"Ah, gentlemen!" she said.

"I doubt it," Thorn muttered. "We just stood up from habit." He looked up then, for the fifth card player had entered. It was Jay Thebold.

The handsome face was slightly bruised tonight, and when he spoke, his jaw moved with difficulty. He scarcely saw anyone but Madame Gwen. His eyes fixed on her, he bowed slightly, smiling, tossing a mass of curly black hair up over his forehead. Thorn saw her answering smile. It had a warmth she had not shown before.

Thebold sat down quickly and his eyes cut across the table and locked with Thorn's.

"Your mules on the table?" he said flatly. There was no smile now, no handsome boisterousness. Only bitter hate.

"I reckon," Skinner Thorn said. "Are yours?"

"Not until I lose twelve thousand cash," Thebold snapped back at him. He half rose from his seat, his hands gripping the table edge until they were blanched white.

"Chips!" Madame Gwen cut in.

Hearing her voice, Thebold slowly sat down, his eyes still riveted on those of his enemy. Thorn sighed. He did not like Jay Thebold, but he could not hate a man that fought as well as the youngster had. He took his thousand dollars worth of chips and amused himself with shaking them together in his big hands.

Madame Gwen dealt the cards, deftly, holding the deck far out over the table, as though to show that the deal was honest. Thorn assumed that it was, being the first hand, and resolved to push any luck he might have. A pair of aces greeted him. He threw out a ten dollar chip. The aces increased on the draw by a pair of tens, and he raked in a nice starting pot. After that there was no talk, and the five settled down to the grim work a hand.

BY THE time the deal had circled the table, Thorn's stacks were growing. Flick had won also. Jay Thebold glanced from one stack to the other.

"You two aren't partners, by any chance?" he said, eyes narrowing at Thorn.

Thorn reached down to his waist, pulled out his heavy sixgun and leveled it across the table. He knocked the butt on the table for attention.

"See that, Thebold? That says I play a lone hand. I wouldn't sign on with you. I won't side with Flick. My gun and me, we're alone together." He was leaning slightly across the table, his teeth bared. Thebold's eyes flicked nervously.

The door opened. A big man entered, stopped when he saw the gun. Skinner Thorn knew who he was immediately. Jay Thebold's older brother. It was written all over his face, the same handsomeness, but hardened and lined. The older Thebold raised a big hand to the cigar in his mouth, took it out slowly.

"That him, Jay?" His eyes only rested for a moment on Thorn, switched to his brother.

"That's him. But I'll handle him, Frank." The younger Thebold gritted that out. Thorn read a lot in the quick look that passed between the two. Likely, Frank had done much of the raising of his younger brother, and knew he was a little

wild. Jay seemed to resent Frank.

Then Thorn saw something else. A look that passed between Frank Thebold and Madame Gwen. A look of icy hate. Thorn smiled. Jay was in love with her. Frank was jealous, or else he knew the woman was not to be trusted with his mercurial brother.

"You handle a gun too easy, Thorn," Frank Thebold said.

Skinner Thorn looked at the gun in his fist. He felt a little foolish holding it. He laid it down on the table.

"Any man who doesn't handle a gun easy," he said, "doesn't live long." He turned to Madame Gwen, whose turn it was to deal. "Run 'em," he said.

She dealt the cards, and soon after, the older Thebold left, closing the room's only door behind him. They were locked up together, then, the five of them in one small room, five people facing each other in the yellow flicker of the lamp above.

Thorn began to feel uneasy. The atmosphere was tight. There wasn't a person in the room who held warm feelings for any of the others, unless it was Thebold and Madame Gwen, and Thorn didn't think she was exactly crazy about the boy. It was an evil game, and every card was played for blood.

"I'll bump fifty dollars, Thorn," Flick said. Thorn had opened on two pairs for ten dollars. Flick was putting it into big money. Hales shook his flabby chins, but shoved in enough chips to stay. Thebold paused.

"Raised a hundred." He closed up the five cards in his hand with a snap, stared around belligerently. Thorn sighed. It was getting expensive. Madame Gwen saw. It was up to Thorn again. The deck lay flat on the table. Flick had dealt them taking one off the flat deck at a time. It should be honest.

"Make it healthy, raise a hundred fifty," Thorn said. He wondered if his two pairs could buy the hand. Flick glanced suspiciously at him, but saw. The others bought in a bit reluctantly.

FLICK dealt the draws. Thorn took only one, built himself a cigarette before he looked at it. The quirly hanging from his lip, he peered at the card. He seemed to have difficulty in seeing it. Glancing up at the lamp, he noticed that it was dim. Running out of coal-oil, he thought. But he said nothing. The atmosphere was too tense, with over fifteen hundred dollars in the middle of the table. The card was a seven, and he had two other sevens in his hand, as well as a pair of jacks. He grunted silently.

"I check," Flick said. The others passed around to Thorn. He glanced once at his full house, put a rawboned hand behind his pile of chips, and shoved them into the pot.

"Nine hundred dollars, I count it."

Their faces were fixed on him now, yellowish faces with deep gray shadows in the light of the failing lamp. Eight eyes searching for the courage to call his bid a lie. Eight eyes full of hate. Blacker eyes now, as the lamp went lower.

"The lamp's going out," Skinner Thorn said quietly.

His voice made Flick jump. Quietly, Madame Gwen said, "Wait till the hand is over. I'll send for oil."

"I call!" Flick said excitedly.

Hales threw his cards in with a disgusted grunt. Thebold counted out piles of chips. Thorn knew he'd stay, even if he held nothing. When Thebold had shoved nine hundred dollars in, Madame Gwen said, "I pass."

Skinner Thorn spread his hand on the table. They strained their eyes to see, for the light was almost out. He watched their faces. Masks, now, and as the light flared up he saw two of the masks twist with despair. He had won. Then, suddenly the light disappeared. It was pitch black.

For a moment they were blinded by the last flicker. It was deathly quiet. "Anybody beat that?" Thorn said, grinning to himself. He counted the pot over in his mind. Twenty-seven and fifteen—forty-two hundred dollars!

"Not with cards, damn you!" Thebold howled.

"Now now," Madame Gwen said. "Let's—" She paused. Through the room came a heavy click. A gunhammer.

"Don't, Thebold!" Thorn growled. "You can't even things up." He couldn't locate the click. He pawed on the table for his gun. It was gone!

"Who cocked that gun?" Thebold cried out.

Thorn heard somebody scramble to the floor. He was leaning back in his chair, and he did the only sensible thing when there was a cocked gun loose in the room. He fell over backwards.

The roar of the gun smashed in on him, and powder blasted into his face, the acrid stink of it. His leg caught the table as he went over, and he thought somebody else must have hooked it too, for it flipped. He was scrambling out of the way, heard the table crash to the floor. Through the crashes there came a single, agonized cry. He jumped to his feet, backed against the wall. It was pitch dark. He had even missed the gunflash.

The door slammed open and light flooded in from the saloon. Men shoved in, blocking the light, and Thorn could see nothing but people milling around. A moment later someone carried in a lamp, held it high.

Jay Thebold lay on his back, blood running out of his shirt front, his eyes fixed open in the vacuity of death.

"My God!" somebody blurted.

Thorn took in the whole scene. His gun lay there beside the body. The others were numb, transfixed with horror. A man came elbowing into the crowd. Abe Green, the city marshal. Behind him came another man who stopped, gasped. The heavily handsome features of Frank Thebold.

"Jay!" he cried out. He rushed forward, knelt down beside his brother's body. He grasped the man's wrist and felt for pulse. He let the wrist drop.

HE LOOKED up. "What dirty son—?" His eyes fixed on Thorn and he stood up, his hands dropping to the gun buckled to his waist. He kicked through a litter of cards and chips, toward Skinner Thorn. Thorn did not move, stood facing him coldly.

"I didn't do it." He said it firmly, but the firmness was only on his lips. Inside, things weren't so quiet. Not when he was unarmed, and the dead man's pain-crazed brother was drawing his gun.

Abe Green clutched Thebold's wrist. "No, Frank, dammit, no!"

"It was his gun!" Thebold bellowed, his voice shaken by a sob.

"I didn't do it," Thorn asserted, more calmly now that Green was holding Thebold's wrist.

"I'll get you for it!" Thebold cried. "I'll get you!" He jerked away from Green, turned and stumbled toward the door, glancing back at his brother's body, then stumbling feverishly on.

"Everybody out of the room but these four," Green said. He was at a loss as to what he should do. But he cleared the room and faced the four of them—Flick leaning against the wall, pale and nervous; Madame Gwen composed, her chin high, but also paler than usual. Hales sitting down, his bloodshot eyes fixed moodily on the body. Thorn sat too. His nerves weren't any too steady.

"Anybody see the gunflash?" Green said.

They shook their heads. "I think everybody was divin' for the floor," Thorn said. "Including me. But it was—" he glanced at the other three—"one of us.

The gun was layin' on the table in front of me."

Two men came in and carried the body. Abe Green went and closed the door. He sat down for a moment in a chair, his lank chin in his hands. At last he looked up, tugging at his straggly mustaches.

"I'm goin' to jail all four of you," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

High Pass to Tres Cruces

THE LOBO jail consisted of a large, stone-walled, barred-windowed room attached to the city marshal's office. It had two bunks. Flick and Thorn sat on one, Madame Gwen and Hales on the other. There was no light but the pale sliver of moon that threw gridiron bar patterns on the floor.

"I'm learnin' to hate this town," Skinner Thorn muttered.

The others ignored his statement. They remained staring at the gridirons of light on the floor, each wrapped in his own gloom.

Thorn thought, Hell, I'm the only one that even says he don't like it. He was the only one who had resisted arrest, too. He resisted, that is, until Abe Green stepped on the murder gun and shoved his own in Thorn's ribs. Hurriedly, Green had deputized six men from the swarm in the saloon and hustled his prisoners to the jail.

Already they could hear mirrors smashing and tables being broken up over in the Palace.

Thorn said, "Listen, Madame Gwen! They're bustin' up your place. Aren't you even mad?"

She looked up at him and smiled sadly. "They hate the Palace. We've whittled down too many of their bank accounts. And Jay—" her voice quavered a bit on the dead man's name— "Jay was the most popular man in town. They think the Palace has killed him."

It sounded like a big crowd had collected in the Palace. Their voices were swelling to a roar—shouts, laughs—undoubtedly they had broken open the liquor closets and were drinking as they smashed. That was no good. Soon the mob would be drunk, and they would do anything, then.

Thorn was beginning to get scared. He did not shun fear. He figured it as a healthy warning of danger. He knew what a drunken mob could do. For one thing, they weren't fond of any of the four prisoners. Thorn, because he'd fought with Thebold. Madame Gwen, as owner of the hated Palace. Flick, as an undoubtedly crooked tinhorn gambler. Hales, because speculators were not well liked, especially the type of speculator that the flabby man obviously was. And besides, one of them had killed Jay.

Yes, he told himself. When they get mad enough, drunk enough, they'll come over and lynch all four of us. To be sure they get the right one.

He got up hurriedly and went to one of the windows, grabbed the bars in his hands. He tried to shake them. They were mounted in rock and mortar. He groaned. The window faced on an alley and he could see nothing but a facing wall, the moon, the mountains surrounding Lobo Valley. Unarmed. He felt crippled without his gun. But it was being held as evidence.

"If the killer gave himself up—" he said aloud. He turned with his back to the window and stared at the three of them. None moved. No, the killer wouldn't give himself up. Not until all the cards were down—when it might be too late.

SLOWLY, Thorn turned toward the window. Something had caught his attention—vaguely seeping into his nos-

trils. The smell became stronger. It was the smell of smoke.

"I believe they're settin' fire to the Palace."

Madame Gwen turned and looked up at him. She opened her mouth to speak, but changed her mind.

"Some men are driven crazy by smoke and fire," Thorn said. He made a cigarette. His hands were trembling. What a place for a man who depended on his own guts and muscles! Guts were no good against steel bars. Muscles no good against a drunken mob of a hundred armed men. The voices were growing louder now, swelling, and there was less laughing than before. The whiskey was taking effect.

There was a noise at the door. It was Abe Green.

"Anybody ready to say who done the killing?" He said it calmly, slouched against the barred door.

"It damn well wasn't me," Thorn growled, sucking desperately on his cigarette.

Abe Green ignored that. "Shame. You're the one they talk about lynchin' first."

Thorn dropped his cigarette. "You're a hell of a lawman if you let 'em."

"No. I ain't goin' to let 'em. Fact is, I'm goin' to let you all go. Get rid of you, that's more like it. I got your mules and wagon outside of town, Thorn. By tomorrow mornin', late, you four should all be in Tres Cruces. Easy road over there."

Thorn grinned. "Maybe you aren't so bad, Green."

The marshal was unlocking the door. "Yeah?" He swung it open and signed for them to follow. If the others had been composed and resigned to their fate, they did not show it now. All three jumped up and scurried out after Thorn and the lawman.

He led them into the marshal's office. There they could see the street through the front windows. It was black with men, silhouetted by the orange flames that billowed out of the doors and windows of the gambling house.

Green opened a back door. They walked through two alleys and came out behind a warehouse. In the shadows were the wagon and four mules. A couple of men were holding their heads. Hurriedly they got on the wagon, Thorn breathing out a great sigh of relief as he vaulted up to the driver's seat.

"Thanks, Green," he said.

Green snorted. "Don't thank me. I got no time for your kind. Any of you. All I'm doin' is gettin' you out of the jail to where I don't have to protect my prisoners."

They were quiet then. The heavy wagon would be slow. Armed riders would set out and follow the road and—

Thorn swore into the marshal's face. But there was no time to waste on that. "Git goin', Mules," he growled. He hauled the blacksnake out of its socket and laid it across their backs.

They jolted the wagon out into the fields toward the distant silver stripe that marked the ascent of the road over the mountains.

IT WAS a rough trip for the three back on the wagon bed. Going over broken ground at full gallop, Thorn was a little uncomforable himself, and he had both the seat springs and thirty years' of body toughening to protect himself. They were all pale and soft, clinging to the sideboards, skidding around, cursing. In no condition to resist the lynch mob that Frank Thebold would lead after them.

At last they were on the road and climbing. The panting mules slowed to a walk. Madame Gwen came and plumped down on the seat beside Thorn.

"Thorn, do you think they'll follow us?"

He turned and stared at her. Her hair was disheveled. A rip showed in the shoulder of her green velvet dress. Her eyes showed fear now. She was no longer the cool, officious owner of the Palace.

"Funny, that you'd come ask me, humble like that," he said.

"It's your wagon." She was clinging to the seat, leaning forward as they climbed. "I think we're not out of trouble. I think that if Frank Thebold leads a bunch after us, we might not get to Tres Cruces."

"*Might* not!" Thorn howled. "Why, that lynch mob could catch us before they sobered up! I came over this road and I know what it's like. Straight to Tres Cruces it goes, and not a place on it to hide or take the wagon off. And not a gun with us." He remembered. "Yeah, one gun. In my saddle bags is a gun."

They were on a level stretch. Thorn jammed the wagon brake on, got out and began shucking one of the mules out of harness.

"The rest of you can do what you want," he said. "I'm takin' the high pass, ridin' a mule. It's a two-day trip and it's tough, but at least, they won't be able to start trailin' until daylight. On this road they don't need a trail, because the wagon can't leave it."

He had the mule out of harness. He dragged the saddle to the back of the wagon, hefted it on and in a couple of deft movements the mule was saddled. "I'll take mine in the high country," he said, swinging into the saddle.

He glanced down at them. Three pale faces turned toward him. Three town people who couldn't even drive a wagon well, trying to outrun a blood-crazy mob. Unarmed. But guns would do them little good anyway.

His voice softened a bit. "Tell them I've gone into the high country. Tell 'em I'm the killer if you want. Maybe they'll believe you and chase me. They'll never catch me up there, even if a hundred of 'em set out." Indeed, that was true. They came no slipperier in rough country than Skinner John Thorn.

"And you are leaving us to face that drunken mob?" Madame Gwen said. She was sitting very straight on the wagon seat, her chin high and her shoulders squared. Very queenly she looked, except for the stark fear in her eyes.

Almost like a queen, Thorn thought. All like a woman. He gulped. When the cards were down, he could handle a runaway steer easier than a woman. He looked away, toward town. The Palace was in full blaze now, an orange torch licking up at the clouds. By now they would be tired of the fire. They'd storm the jail.

Abe Green would laugh in their faces and say the jailbirds had flown. There'd be angry growling as the word traveled. A few men would mount horses and shout. Frank Thebold would be coldly, viciously sober, and would restrain them until all were mounted. Then—

"Would you?" she said. There was almost a sob in her voice. A very womanly sob, not one you'd expect from the owner of The Palace.

It wouldn't be nice, he thought, facing a hundred wild, raging horsemen. Ten miles up the road they'd be caught. But if they mounted, rode with him, they'd never make it over the high pass. Never. And like chains on his ankles, they'd drag him back to the wolves.

"Please!" Madame Gwen said.

Thorn tugged his hat down low. He was angry at the futility of his position. Take them on, save them to die tomorrow instead of tonight. He could have left Hales and Flick behind. But not when Madame Gwen pleaded.

"Dammit!" he growled. "Take the saddled horse, Madame Gwen. Let's get the others out of harness."

He had to do it himself. The others could only fumble with straps and buckles. Only Flick knew anything about riding. Hales sat his mule like a half-empty sack of flour. He'd be a lot thinner in a day or so, Thorn thought.

And at the Devil's Bluff, they took their last look at Lobo. The die was cast. Ahead was the high pass to Tres Cruces.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Sitting Duck

THE TRAIL was easy at first. That was one of Thorn's three bits of luck. It gave the three town people time to learn to cling to their mules. And it was lucky that the animals were all broken to saddle. There was no easier riding animal than a mule.

They broke into a rolling pace and held it for three hours, over a soft, well-marked trail through the timber. It died on a rocky outcropping over a ravine with a stream threading through it. That gave Thorn his last bit of luck.

He had been over this country some years before and knew that the stream did not advance them toward Tres Cruces. But he would waste only an hour on it and it would slow their followers many hours.

"It's bad goin' in the river," he told them. "But we got to cover our trail." He glanced once more at them before pushing his mule into the stream. Madame Gwen had tucked her skirts up until her knees were bare. Her hair had tumbled down from its precarious setting. She had tied it into a businesslike knot at the back of her neck. She squirmed uncomfortably in the saddle, but her chin was up.

The two men were not so encouraging. Hales sat slumped like a great frog. Flick's narrow face was twisted into a painful scowl.

"This animal's killin' me!" he whined dismally.

"I hope he hurries up with it," Thorn growled at him, and pushed his mule into the stream.

It was bad from the start. Full of rocks, continually changing depth. The moon was setting and there was little light to show the falls and boulders that suddenly loomed up. No, he was wrong. If they rode an hour in it, it would not hold up the pursuers half a day, as he'd thought.

He kept counting on the distance he could cover alone. The three—parasites, that's what they were. They cut his time in half. Considering it that way, his hope of making Tres Cruces was founded on the slim chance that Frank Thebold and the men that would follow him were stupid trailers. Men who did not know the high country.

But on the other hand, Thebold might enlist trappers, prospectors, cowhands who knew the country like the backs of their hands. That would end it all in a hurry.

At last the canyon widened into a flat, rocky floor. He led them out of it. They halted a moment to breathe the mules. Flick whined that his legs were freezing from the icy water splashed on them. So were Thorn's, but he was used to ignoring such things. They pushed on.

An hour before dawn he halted them in a little gully. "Get off your mules," he said. "We'll have coffee before the light can come and show them the campfire."

Rapidly, he built a small fire. While they crowded around, warming themselves at the fire, he got an old tin can full of coffee beans out of the saddle bags, and a sack with some flour still in the bottom. He emptied most of the coffee beans back into the saddle bags and got water from a nearby stream, set it to boil.

He had Madame Gwen grind the coffee beans down between two rocks, while he

wet the flour and rolled it into pancakes. These he wrapped around sticks and told the men to hold them over the fire.

As she finished grinding the beans and dumped them into the cam of heating water, Madame Gwen said, "You know your business, Thorn."

He squatted down beside her, holding a couple of dough sticks over the fire. "And what is my business?" he said.

She sat down and clasped her arms around her legs, drawing her knees up to her chin, staring intently at the leaping flames. "Living, I suppose. No." She shook her head. "That's something else. I guess your business is living where the weak ones perish."

He looked sharply at her. "Not as nice as saying my business is living."

She gave him a contemptuous look that reminded him that she had owned the Palace. "No!" she said sharply. "Not at all as nice!"

THORN greeted the dawn with a sinking heart. He wished he knew more about what to expect from Frank Thebold. The man was hard and smart, he knew that. At this moment he would have riders gathered at the abandoned wagon, searching for the trail they had taken.

They would be sober men now, the madness gone out of them, and a cold deliberate fury in its place. Not too large a group. Theobold would be that smart. Well armed and mounted, probably fifteen or so in number. In two hours they'd be to the stream. By noon at the latest, they'd have found the trail leading out of it.

In the afternoon Thebold and his men would make two miles for one that Thorn could squeeze out of the weary mules and poor riders he was trying to shove over the high pass. It would be a race for darkness. Tomorrow, maybe—but he couldn't think of tomorrow. Now it was a race for darkness.

He had gotten the gun from the saddle bags. A .41 short-barreled revolver with six cartridges in the chambers and not extras. His beltful of .45's was useless. He stuck the .41 into his holster, where it rattled around loosely.

Grimly, he led them on.

They stopped at a small stream that noon and gave the mules twenty minutes to roll and graze. Thorn watched them carefully. Hales' and Flick's mounts were becoming restless, sore from the two men bouncing on their unprotected backbones. They might easily take a notion to run off. Mules were that way.

The two men flung themselves down beside the stream, exhausted. Their fine clothes were dirty and torn now, their faces sagging with weariness. Only Madame Gwen had any spirit left. She sat up on a ridge above them. After a moment she called down.

"Thorn. I see smoke."

He clambered up the rocks and stopped beside her. A thin thread of smoke wisping up out of the mountains on their backtrail. As he watched, Thorn built himself a cigarette, sucked in on the smoke greedily. He was getting hungry, wishing they could build a fire and make coffee, but not daring to risk the smoke. For him, cigarettes would do.

"About ten miles," he said. "They've stopped for a nice leisurely lunch. That figures out to where they should catch us a couple hours before dark."

She stiffened when he said that, but she mastered her emotions. Silently, they watched the smoke. Thorn's mind drifted back to the tragedy that brought them to this. Jay Thebold at the poker table, his eyes filled with hate when he looked at the three men, going soft when he glanced toward Madame Gwen.

"Thebold was in love with you?" he said.

She turned and gave him a direct, brown-eyed stare. She was a handsome

woman. A lot of spirit in her well-chiseled face. A lot of hardness, too.

"He said so."

"And you?"

"I toyed with him," she said, and her fine lips curled. "A handsome child. Too handsome. Too likeable."

Sucking deep on his cigarette, glancing at her, at the smoke, at the mules and the two men sprawled below, he said, "Did you toy with any others?"

She turned and smiled at him. A self-contented smile. "All others, Thorn. I liked to see men snarl and snap at each other because of me. The'd be so nervous when we played cards that I always won."

Skinner Thorn snubbed out his cigarette. "You didn't win last night," he growled. And, as an afterthought, remembering the enormous pot he had won and had nothing to show for, he said, "Nobody won, Madame Gwen. Nobody at all."

BY MID-AFTERNOON he could see dust banners moving up fast behind. They were in very rough, arid country, thick with brush and rock. Their course dipped through canyons and skirted cliff facings on narrow ledges of broken rock. Only the rock gave them an advantage.

Thorn crossed every rocky section he could find. That kept them from raising a traceable amount of dust, and delayed the trackers each time. But the great red ball of the sun was not going down fast enough. Dark would stop the trailing, but they'd never reach darkness.

He calculated a jutting cliff in the distance as darkness, and knew they'd never make it. Hales was slumped over his mule's neck, only the sheer flabby weight of his body keeping him mounted. Flick's narrow face was twisted and showed the pain of a bodyful of bruises, and his mouth was busy emitting a solid stream of curses.

By sheer strength of will, Madame Gwen kept her back stiff and her mouth set grimly. When she broke, Thorn thought, it would be all in a heap. Flick might go on swearing for another full day. Hales was unpredictable. He looked to be at the end of his endurance, but he had looked that way from the start.

So it would come, he thought, about an hour before dark. Thebold had already proven his men were not fools. They were good men to have trailed this long, ridden this hard. So, before the curtain of dark could close down on the trail, Thebold would arrive.

If only he could ride off, leave them. Alone, he'd make it, even now. What held him back? Maybe it was the thought that two of them were innocent, and that he couldn't abandon them to the wolves. Would that keep free-riding Skinner John Thorn from going his own way? No. Maybe he enjoyed this, being the log that three drowning people clung to. Maybe a man who had been sufficient unto himself for so long needed that.

And all the time the spits of dust behind were creeping closer.

THEY topped a ridge with a wide expanse of raw, red, broken country beyond. Glancing back, Thorn's heart flipped over. A rider appeared on the far ridge. About four miles. Another rider. They stopped. A moment later the ridge swarmed with them.

Thorn jerked around, glanced at the sun. An hour and a half. He kicked his mule down over the other side. And it broke into a run. The others saw that and they galloped down after him.

"Ride!" he howled out. Panic gripped him as the mule charged with great ground-eating strides. He had to get away! Let them keep up if they could! Thebold's men were coming like a swarm of locusts. Ride! He could ride like this for an hour and a half and then the mule would burst his heart, but no matter, it

would be dark and he would be safe.

"Ride!" he yelled. A swarm of them coming. Ride and ride and ride to darkness, to that black curtain that would drape over the cliff ahead in an hour and a half. Five minutes ticked off and there were eighty-five to go.

He dimly heard clattering hoofs behind. He hit a dry stream bed, his mule lunged up the other side, tearing through the brush. Another mule clashed over the dry stones and ripped through the brush after him. Another. Then, a scream.

His legs went stiff as pokers and he leaned, jerking the mule around to a clawing stop. Madame Gwen dodged hers past him, and Hales came rushing up, the mule halting itself, for he could not control it. The little gambler was down in the creek bed. He threw himself off his falling beast. There was a sickening cr-a-k-k! Flick was rolling over the stones, screaming. The mule lunged to its feet but went down again. Its right foreleg was snapped like a dry branch.

Cursing until tears bulged from his eyes, Thorn rode down into the stream bed. He pulled the .41. A gunshot won't matter now, he thought. The mule was whinnying with a low rusty scrape in its throat as the pain of the broken foreleg shot through its body. He put the gun muzzle to its ear and triggered. The shot clattered off through the canyon. The mule sagged into a heap.

"You ride double with me, Flick," he said. He was calm now. The game was up.

A HALF hour more and the hoofs were within hearing distance. They went over rises quickly, for some of Thebold's riders might be within rifle range. The jutting cliff seemed so close now, the sun so low, the velvet blanket of dark so near—but the following hoofs were louder.

They walked their mules and trotted them, sometimes ran when the ground was level and the panic riding their spines was jumping too fast for them to bear. Thorn's mule was tiring badly, with the double load.

The first bullet sang overhead, hit a rock and screamed off with a misshapen whirr. "Less than half a mile," Thorn said. He had to do something. And there seemed to be only one thing he could do. "Pull up here," he commanded.

They stopped in a rocky arroyo. "You'll leave no tracks here," he said. He glanced from one worn, panicked face to another. "Dismount. Head for that cliff. I'm going to dry drawing them off. Leave as little rail as possible." He looked at Madame Gwen's high-heeled slippers and groaned. "Strip the saddlebags off and take them with you."

They followed his orders. They had to, for their own minds were reduced by weariness and fear to mere animal mechanisms. When they were gone down the gully he caught the halters of his other two mules and transferred himself to the one that was saddled. He drew his gun and waited.

Three of them came racing over a crest, scarcely a hundred yards away. He sat, calm, now that he was on his own. They disappeared. There was another ridge between him and them. He raised his gun and thumbed back the hammer.

The same three jolted into full silhouette. The one in the middle was Frank Thebold. Thorn knew he would be leading. And he could see the deep black lines that the falling sun threw into his face. Lines of pain, tight and squeezed by hate. There was no mercy in that bleak face.

Thebold would take no prisoners. In the second that he held his fire, Thorn knew he could kill Thebold. But it would not be right. The man was hungry for vengeance. His brother was dead. Thorn know he would be the same, and so he could not kill the man. He raised the

muzzle of his gun and fired over their heads.

They jerked their horses to a halt, and clawing the rocks, the horses milled and slid down the side of the rise. The riders ducked down below their horses' necks. Thorn spurred his mule and kicked at the others, yanked their lead ropes and let them run ahead.

The two mules hawed and raced. They were glad to be free of their burdens. Their nerves, shaken by the bad riders, were shattered by the gunshot and they bolted. His own mule bolted. He almost laughed with relief as they went crashing down the canyon.

The shadows deepened. Thebold's men couldn't see well down here, not with the coming darkness and the dust he was stirring. They'd think all the mules carried riders.

They came after him in a clashing avalanche of hoofs.

For five minutes he rode at breakneck speed, always downhill. They were far behind and shooting at every shadow. They lost him for a moment and then somebody shouted, "Down this way!" and they were pounding hard after him again.

He thought of his three companions and wondered if they had gotten to the cliff. If not, it would be better for him. He'd be alone, free.

The other two mules were way ahead now. He picked out a mesquite thicket and leaped from his mule, landing in the brush, rolling. He scrambled behind a rock. Like a whirlwind they came smashing down the canyon, nearer, suddenly on top of him and he was choking in the billows of dust.

Then they were gone.

Even as he crawled out and began climbing up through the mesquite, he could see the great fingers of darkness stretching out over the hills, trying to cover the whole canyon.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back to the Wall!

HE CLIMBED toward the cliff face with long swinging strides. Damn, but it felt good to be alone!

Alone, he could walk to Tres Cruces through any net of mounted, rifle-armed riders that Thebold could collect. He could shoot game with the .41 and laugh as they tried to chase the gunshot.

Then why was he walking up toward the jutting cliff? He didn't know, that was the truth of it. He suspicioned that for he first time in his life, he belonged to something. A tiny group of four fugitives. They were together. Did that make sense? When one had done a cold-blooded murder, and by his or her silence, condemned the others to death?

Under the jutting cliff was a large open space. He growled out, "It's Thorn."

Behind some rocks, a voice squeaked, "Here!"

With a sigh, he strode over to them. They stood up behind the rocks to greet him. A sorry lot. The men's clothes were torn and both of them were ready to drop from exhaustion. Madame Gwen tottering, one high heel gone, her ground-length skirt ripped in a dozen places.

"I hoped you wouldn't come back," she said quietly.

"Why?"

"You could be in Tres Cruces by morning."

He scratched the beard that was bristling out on his chin and stared at her. She knew. The others knew it too, but they hadn't the courage to say so. He began to think that Madame Gwen was quite a woman.

He bluffed out of it. "Hell, I got to collect my money. You're each payin' me a thousand dollars for being guided to Tres Cruces." He led them around the cliff toward a place where he saw some

crazily rutted gullies. There they could build a fire and make coffee. That had to be done before the moon was up, so that smoke wouldn't be seen.

"I haven't got any money," Flick whined. "Thousand dollars—"

"Oh, shut up," Madame Gwen snapped, adding a few unsavory words to express her contempt for the little gambler.

Thorn selected a place under an overhanging rock, behind some brush. He built a small fire. Thebold's men would have to be right on top of it to see anything. And Thorn knew that only by the most unlikely chance would they be found before the moon came up.

Again Madame Gwen ground the coffee beans. Hales settled himself lethargically by the fire, staring at the bubbling pot of water. "No food?" he said.

"No food," Thorn growled back at him. "You'll lose more weight before we're done, Hales. You've lost a lot already, eh?" he said, staring at the man's slack yellow face. "Business worries?"

Hales looked at Thorn and then at Madame Gwen. Strangely, his bloodshot eyes got a spark of life in them. He stared at her, crouching over the rocks she was grinding the coffee with. "Worries," he said, and then his eyes switched from her and were again dead. He sank back into his shell.

Thorn turned from him. He had work to do. He took a jackknife from his pocket and began cutting up the saddlebags. He peeled several strips from the edges, making thongs from them.

"What're you doing?" Madame Gwen had dumped the ground coffee beans into the can of water and was sitting by him, watching.

"Making you some shoes. Put out your foot." She extended a leg from her tattered dress. He took off her slipper and threw it into the fire. He fitted half a saddlebag around her foot, cut holes for lacing. It made a rough sort of moccasin. While she laced it tight he cut another.

"We got a lot of walking to do," he said. He eyed her long skirt. "That's no good. You'll break your neck tripping over that skirt."

She smiled and took the knife from him. She hacked the skirt off above her knees. The pile of green velvet that was cut off she tore into two pieces and tied each around a leg, like leggings.

"I'll look kind of funny coming into Tres Cruces like this," she said, smiling.

AFTER they had drunk the coffee he put the fire out and covered the site with sand. He led them a mile through ravines to a sheltered spot where they could rest for a couple of hours. This darkness made their discovery impossible, but they could not see to travel, either, without the moon.

Skinner Thorn laid on his back, every nerve alert. He could rest this way. An hour of it and he would be good as new. The chase had drained little of his reserves of strength.

In a few minutes there were snores from two men. He glanced toward them. Madame Gwen was sitting up.

"I hear hoofs, Thorn."

He could hear them too. Clattering on rock, one set up on the brow of a canyon, another to the east. "They'll stop in a little while and wait for the moon," he said. "Then there'll be a rider on every high place, watching. By dawn we'll be six or eight miles from Tres Cruces. And they'll be on us then. If not—earlier."

She sat there, listening until the hoofs died out.

Thorn made a cigarette, lit it, held it cupped carefully in his hand. "They hate you pretty much, back in Lobo."

"Yes. I made them hate me. You see, I was married once, Thorn. I was young. Married to a man who was as righteous and self-important as any in Lobo." She stared off into the darkness. "He ran

off with another woman. He was killed by a runaway horse. Well, I showed Lobo what I think of men."

"Yeah? And what do you think of men?"

She smiled at him, reached over and laid her hand on his wrist. "After what you've done for us, I guess you deserve it. So, being a woman and inconsistent, I'll say—it depends on the man."

Thorn let her warm hand lay on his wrist while he finished smoking his cigarette.

WHEN the moon rose they took the trail. Thorn started slowly and then increased his pace. It gave them a sense of fear and put wings on their feet. Moving on low ground and avoiding every necessity of crossing a skyline, Thebold's scattered riders could not spot them.

The fugitives could see the riders, mounted and siting on cliffs and hilltops, eyes scanning the moon-flecked uplands for movements. Once there was a shout behind them. A dozen riders materialized out of the night, heading at full speed for a spot a mile behind. Thorn smiled at that. A deer, perhaps, had caught someone's attention. After that the riders were thinner as they tried to cover a larger area.

Once, Thorn glimpsed a light in the distance. That would be Tres Cruces. It fitted with his calculations. Too far. Still some six or more miles to do after daylight.

After they stopped to rest, Thorn had to jerk Hales to his feet. He was the oldest of the party, the most dissipated. He stumbled along, the last in line. Thorn went as fast as he dared, fast enough to keep panic in them. Every time he looked back at them he groaned. Bent over, forcing each foot in front of the other. Soft and pulpy. Their muscles coarsened by soft living. Madame Gwen had youth to support her. The others had only fear.

They stumbled on.

Dawn came upon them suddenly and left them blinking their eyes. The craggy hills sloped down to Tres Cruces Valley, and out of the open country the sun came blindingly.

Madame Gwen slumped down on a rock, retied her torn leggings. Her feet must be pretty sore in those makeshift shoes, Thorn thought.

He looked down over the falling, rocky land. It would be tough getting down there. A narrow canyon seemed to be the only way, one that opened into the Tres Cruces plain and a maze of mesquite that rolled on to the town.

He led them down, sliding over rocks and scrambling through gullies toward the canyon. Then, behind, a shot rang out. Someone shouted. Hoofs drummed.

He glanced at the others. Their eyes were too dead now for panic. He glanced down at the canyon and they saw it and understood. That was as far as they'd get. He started down at a trot. They broke into a stumbling run after him.

A rifle cracked ahead and the shrill whine of death shrieked overhead. Hoofs were coming with loudening clatter. Down the canyon Thorn saw a pile of rocks. There they would make their stand—one gun and four .41 bullets and four doomed people.

They saw it too and ran lumpily toward it. Another bullet came crashing in, bouncing from wall to wall of the canyon. Someone was shooting from a long distance. Then the clattering hoofs entered the canyon and were echoed into a roar of sound.

"Behind the rocks!" Thorn howled. The three of them dove for the projecting rocks. Skinner John Thorn turned, pulling his pistol.

HE WAS a second too late. At the mouth of the canyon a horse had been halted. The rider had turned side-

ways, squinting over his rifle sights. Prematurely, he squeezed the shot off Or maybe, Thorn thought, he aimed that way. Thorn was thinking that as his right leg was torn from under him. He flopped down on the rock canyon floor. A streak of agony flamed up from his leg through him.

He blinked the water from his eyes and got up on one elbow. He saw the rider levering another cartridge into his gun. Thorn raised the .41 and brought the barrel down slowly. It was not a good long-range gun, with that short barrel. But Thorn's years of experience made up for it. The sights were dead on the rider's shadowed face as he squeezed the trigger.

The gun jumped and the shock went back clear to Thorn's leg and he bit the scream into his throat. The rider was struck as though by a horse's kick. He spun around and pitched out of the saddle. He was crying out in pain as he dragged himself over the ground to some bushes.

Hands caught Thorn and dragged him over behind the rocks. He scrunched himself up with his belly on top of one rock, his gun resting on another in front of him. His leg hung limp. It was broken below the knee.

"Go," he told them. "I can hold them off for a while. Go into the mesquite. If you get close enough to Tres Cruces they won't dare shoot."

He didn't look at them but heard the scramble of feet. Feet going away. All but one. Madame Gwen knelt beside him.

"You can't walk, Thorn?"

"No. Move on."

"You've dragged us through, and now you cover our escape?"

He said nothing, just held his gun leveled on the spot where the rider had crawled into the brush. There were more hoofs coming now, the thin echo of them clattering through the canyon walls. He said nothing because there was nothing to say. He could not go on, but they could. He could pocket up the riders for quite a while—maybe. He flinched as a shock of pain roared up from his leg and twisted his stomach.

"I can't go either," she said.

He turned toward her. Her face was drawn with weariness under the streaks of dirt. But her chin was high.

"You better go," he said, still looking at her.

She shook her head. "My heart's not in it any more." She looked directly at him and her brown eyes went soft. "I'm staying with you until the end, Thorn. You're a good man."

He looked ahead as the hoofs came pounding closer. "The end? How long is it, until the end?"

"Four minutes. Or maybe forty years." She said that simply, firmly.

There was a shout, a chorus of yells, and a dozen riders came roaring into the canyon. At their head was Frank Thebold, his eyes burning. The man behind the bush yelled to him.

As they stopped in a cloud of yellow dust, Thorn yelled, "Get out of this canyon. I'm shooting to kill."

Hurriedly, they sought cover, some throwing their horses down, others hunching down behind rocks. As soon as they settled they began shooting.

Gwen said, "So you're cornered, Skinner John Thorn. Two men will get away, one a murderer, the other—well, neither of them is much of a man. You see, it wasn't me that killed Jay. And I know you didn't do it."

HE SHOOK his head, panting deeply. The strength was flowing out his wounded leg. He could feel his face going pale, the skin tightening coldly.

Thebold's men began moving in. A fusillade of lead crashed over the rocks while Gwen and Thorn ducked. When

he peered out a half-dozen had moved up. They started firing and as he dropped again he saw the rest running forward for new cover.

"In good—range—for—my gun," Thorn croaked out. But the gun was shaking in his hand. He could only rest it on the rock, and when they poured in another volley and he ducked, he lost it. He couldn't get up, either. He felt her leaning over him, the warmth of her body. His face was against the cool rock, and softly, she kissed the back of his neck. He smiled.

"I guess—I took too damn big a load, Gwen—three people, when I wasn't used to carryin' anythin' more than myself alone."

Suddenly there was a scream. A shrill, mad scream. From behind. Thorn raised himself but could not look back. "Hales!" Gwen gasped.

The flabby promoter pounded straight up the canyon. He stopped a few feet in front of them. His back was to them, and they could see that he was trembling violently.

"Don't shoot!" he screamed at the riflemen. "I killed your brother. Thebold, I killed him!"

They saw Frank Thebold raise himself from behind a rock. A cocked sixgun was in his fist. Slowly he walked toward Hales.

The man was sobbing and only Gwen and Thorn could hear him. "Hated him—hated him—he beat me—everything! Money—" He turned around then, and they saw that his haggard face was completely broken. "You wanted no man!" he said to Gwen. "Except him, maybe. Yes, you wanted him. And I couldn't let him beat me out of—you—too. Not after everything else!"

He turned again. "Don't shoot, Thebold! I'll hand but don't, don't—don't shoot me!"

A man might tell the river to stop running, Thorn thought. Or tell Frank Thebold not to shoot. They watched while Thebold's gun flamed, roared. Hales screamed. He twisted around, clutching at the gushing hole in his chest, the blood bursting through his fingers. His face grimaced, and they saw he was trying to smile.

"I had to stick with you, with—" he gasped but twisted his mouth into a smile again—"with the gang. Had to do—my part."

The smile was gone then as he tumbled to the ground and was still. There he lay silently.

WHAT happened after that Thorn knew mostly from Gwen's whispering in his ear. "Doctor Livesley's with them. Good doctor." It didn't feel like a good doctor to Thorn as they lashed his leg to a rifle, but any doctor had to hurt, he guessed. They put some brandy in his mouth and he opened his eyes. Over him stood Frank Thebold, looking down at him.

"We'll take you to Tres Cruces," he said stiffly. "Can't figure why you didn't duck out of this crowd, Thorn." He shrugged and looked coldly at Madame Gwen. "You're going to Tres Cruces too."

"Of course I am," she snapped. And then it all faded out again for Thorn and there was only Gwen whispering in his ear.

"There'll be no more free riding for you," she said. "No more just gun and horse and yourself. I'll burden you down."

"It's time for that," he whispered quietly back.

He had carried three people from Lobo almost to Tres Cruces, he thought. A fitting end to the wild free days of Skinner John Thorn.

THE END

Mail-Order Millionaire

By JOHN T. LYNCH

ALTHOUGH his six-foot, 250-pound carcass was the picture of tough and robust health, Tiny Tom Black always insisted he was too ailing to dig for gold like all of his friends were doing, in 1850, in California's southern mines.

"I got a floatin' kidney," he often wailed. "When I lean over it floats up to my throat an' nigh chokes th' life out of me." Thus he explained his lazy way of living in the busy mining town of Blanding Forks.

Tiny Tom made his living, but not much more, by writing letters and mine reports for those miners who had never learned to write. He charged five dollars per letter, and ten dollars for each mine report. The letters he wrote were only so-so. But on mine reports he was an expert.

Detailed, written descriptions of mines were important when a miner wanted to sell his claim to an out-of-town buyer. The Blanding Forks postmaster received many letters of inquiry about available good properties from unknown Easterners, who wanted to get in on the gold rush—by mail.

It became the accepted custom, in Blanding Forks, for a prospector or a miner, after finding out a particular claim was worthless, to check with the postmaster for the name of an Easterner who wanted to purchase a mine. The miners took the broad-minded attitude that an Easterner who was too damned lazy to come out to the diggings in person, deserved to get stung.

Many claims which had been mined out, or which had proved of no value from the beginning, were sold to unwary mail-order buyers on the strength of Tiny Tom Black's extremely imaginative and dishonest reports. Tiny Tom knew all of the technical terms concerning claims and diggings, and he made up a few of his own.

Tiny Tom could describe a shallow hole in the ground with such artistry that his report would seem to be the description of the richest, deepest, and most desirable mine in the entire West.

Tiny Tom had to eat—and drink—so much, to keep his fragile system from dissolving, that his income from writing letters and reports was not quite sufficient to keep him in the style to which he was accustomed. He decided to augment his income by simply inventing a new type of sluice box. It did not occur to him that he could not do it. He figured that, with the proper tools and materials, his agile mind would do the rest. The hitch was that he needed one hundred dollars for original supplies—and he did not have one hundred dollars.

So certain was he that only one hundred dollars was standing between him and a

fortune, Tom was heartbroken for a time.

Not far from town, Sam Borden and his brother, Ed, had been working a practically worthless claim for a few months. In final discouragement, they decided to try to sell it to an Eastern sucker. When they came in to see Tiny Tom about writing up a mine report, Sam Borden said, "Tom, we been hearin' that you're in dire need of a hundred berries. Well—instead of us payin' you just th' usual ten dollars for writin' up th' report, why don't you let it go? Then, when we sell th' mine, we'll give you a good commission."

Tiny Tom immediately saw how he could get his much needed hunded dollars. "That's a deal," he grinned. "An' you'll sure sell your mine, pronto. I aim to make up th' best report I ever made!"

Having such an avid personal interest in the matter, Tiny Tom, without even bothering to go out and look at the worthless mine, outdid himself on the report. He put everything he had into it. He used more fancy phrases and imposing words than he thought he knew. He painted a word-picture of what would seem to be the most amazing claim ever known to mankind. It was a classic.

When the report was completed, Tiny Tom proudly turned it over to the Borden brothers. Tom slept happily that night. His hundred dollars was not far off, now.

The following morning Sam Borden hurried into town to see Tiny Tom. "Say, Tom," Sam said, "me an' Ed read that report last night. We must've read it a hundred times. An' each time it sounded better."

"That's great," smiled Tiny Tom. "Are you goin' to send it East right away?"

"Oh, no," answered Sam. "Hell, when we read about how good our claim is, we decided to keep it ourselves. We'd be foolish to sell th' greatest gold mine in th' world!"

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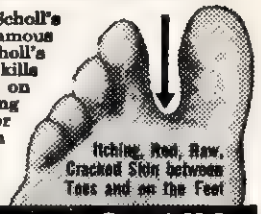

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(Continued from page 41)

flames. The tongues of fire were licking hungrily toward those blank, upstairs windows. He laughed.

"I'm a fool, all right," he said aloud to himself. "Lose her, then throw away a fortune."

"Then I ought to make a good one for you," a voice said softly in his ear. "Because I threw away a fortune, too."

"Myra!" His arms were around her, and his head buried hungrily in her hair. After a moment, he looked at her. "Threw away a fortune? How?"

"By not marrying you," she said, holding out a piece of paper. "I made Cal Larson put it in writing, when I came out here from New York City two months ago."

He took the paper, and read the few words written on it: "I agree to pay Myra Dawn $10,000 on the day she marries Buck Neal and induces him to leave town." The note was signed, "Calvin Larson."

A dozen thoughts crowded into his mind, clamoring to be heard. But he gave a short, bitter laugh.

"I must be hard to take—that you didn't want me even with ten thousand dollars thrown in."

"No, it wasn't you that was hard to take. It was the ten thousand. I couldn't marry you that way." She stopped talking and kissed him. He let the paper slip out of his fingers to the ground. And after a while, they strolled toward the ticket window. He looked down at her and grinned.

"Maybe we've got a decent streak in us—or maybe it's just that we're darn fools."

"Whatever it is, let's not worry about it now," she told him. "Because we'll have a lifetime together to find out what it is."

(Continued from page 32)

boys haven't forgotten how to use these instruments."

Mark Blasser sighed, his square jaws chewing slowly on his tobacco. "Seems like all we do is cut fences and make fences."

"I'd rather cut 'em than make 'em," Stryker said. "A nice peaceful pastime."

"Aw, you musta done plenty of fightin', too," Young Mac maintained stoutly, eyeing them with pride.

"That's over with, son," said Stryker. "For good, we hope. No more war, and no more fences on the open range. A better country for kids to grow up in."

Carol Duffield was kneeling by the bunk in the corner, bathing and putting a fresh dressing on Selby's wounded side, her coppery red head bent intently.

"It's clean," she said. "He's going to live all right."

Dan Stryker stood tall and rangy, looking down at her with a deep soft light in his tired gray eyes, a grave thankful smile on the weather-whipped leanness of his angular bronzed face.

"I reckon we'll all live and everythin'll be fine," Stryker said slowly. "With a woman like you on the Rawhide, Cary. And a hand like Young Mac here."

"Unless we all go to jail," Tom Morton remarked casually.

Carol arose and turned the full glory of her green eyes and smiling face on Dan Stryker. "There's a government man in Laramie. Those fences and claims are illegal, except those claims that are homesteaded, like yours. I told him the whole story. He saw Mac, and he knows you were fighting in self-defense. It's Crown and Anvil who will face judgment, not you men from Rawhide Creek."

She moved easily toward Stryker, and the others became discreetly absorbed in the activity outside in South Pass.

THE END

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(Continued from page 77)

rather put out all this money and take all this stuff the doc gives him than to stop some indulgence.

I guess the tendency of the average man to be this way was best expressed by Joe E. Lewis, the nightclub comedian. Joe was telling a friend that he went to a doctor for a checkup and the doctor told him he had to give up smoking, drinking, women and betting on horses.

So his friend said, "Well, what'd you do?"

Joe said, "I changed Doctors."

• • •

I recently had the pleasure of meeting the country's leading Western recording artist—none other than Eddy Arnold, the Tennessee Ploughboy. Boy, did we have a time! It was like old home week for me.

I wanted to see if Eddy was really a country boy and I asked him if he ever called hawgs. He let go with a terrific shriek and before you knew it the studio was full of executives, down to see what the commotion was. It made my heart good to see those boys come around to hear some good country music.

He's really a great caller, and also a great guy. You know, he has sold over ten million records to date—which is one of the highest figures in recording history. His largest selling record, his rendition of *Bouquet of Roses,* sold over a million copies in 1949. One of his latest recordings, *Don't Rob Another Man's Castle,* has already passed the half-million mark—and the year isn't over yet.

Just in case you are interested, Eddy's from a little metropolis in the hills of Tennessee called Henderson which is just a stone's throw—as the crow flies—from Stoneville, N. C. That's where I come from.

BOB POOLE'S SONG CORRAL

SAY, HAVE you ever noticed how certain things seem to pass from our scene of life? Fr'instance you never see written on the walls any more, KILROY WAS HERE. I just wonder what ever happened to Kilroy. In fact, I never did know who Kilroy was in the first place. But he sure got around in the strangest places.

Let's see, what else has passed from our way of things? Oh yes, the Yo-Yo. You rarely see anybody playing with a Yo-Yo these days, do you? I guess that's gone for the time being.

I reckon about the only real exciting thing that still survives is the knuckle cracking contests they still hold each year in Stoneville. Now there is real thrills and excitement for you in that. I used to enter them contests every winter down there. We'd all line up around the big barrel stove in the Feed Store on cold night and see who could crack his knuckles the most. Of course I would never win, but it was sure fun in those days.

• • •

Most of the recording companies have gone into recording hymns using the distinctive styles of their Western artists teamed up with the top pop singers to make some really good listening. Take for example COLUMBIA'S Dinah Shore and Gene Autry. They just waxed two well-known hymns, *The Old Rugged Cross* and *In The Garden*. They succeeded in doing a very nice job. A choir backs them up.

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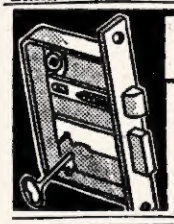

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vided by Wayne who is quite a virtuoso on the harmonica. The other side of the record is titled *Under the Double Eagle* and it will get a fair showing.

• • •

Don't you just hate people who come up to you and greet you by saying: "Have you read any good books lately?" That's the way one of the gals in my office greeted me once. I told her, yes, I'd just finished reading the new Sears Roebuck catalogue. She didn't think that was very funny.

Well, it didn't matter She's the type that wouldn't appreciate good literature anyhow. But I got to thinking that maybe I should read something besides Li'l Abner, so I went out and bought me one of Mr. Webster's under-the-bridge word books.

I took it home and started reading it. Have you ever read it? Not much of a plot, but it's got some good words in it. I ran across one big word I thought I'd spring on you today—the word idiosyncrasy. Isn't that a dilly? Idiosyncrasy! I bet you don't know what it means.

Well if you don't, look it up like I had to. It took me an hour to learn how to pronounce it. By the time I see you again I will know what it means. Anyhow, I got an answer for the next person that asks me if I've read any good books lately.

• • •

Cry of the Dying Duck in a Thunder Storm is the latest novelty to hit the market. As far as I know there is only one recording and that's enough. It's done by Cactus Pryor for FOUR STAR and it's quite amusing, especially the verses and the sound effects. I think you'll like it.

Well that's all for this issue. See you next time.

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SEND FOR FREE SAMPLES

Build a Fine Business---FULL or SPARE TIME!

Sell MASON LEATHER JACKETS

EVERY OUTDOOR WORKER A PROSPECT!

Get Started Right! Don't Invest a Cent!

We furnish EVERYTHING you need to start selling quality leather jackets at once—and to build a fine profitable ever-growing business for yourself.

DON'T just "WISH" for independence. FORGET worries and uncertainties! Get set now for big earnings in your own business, backed by this 46-year old million-dollar company—Leader in its field!

WE SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE MONEY FROM VERY FIRST HOUR

You get complete FREE SELLING OUTFIT! We furnish How-to-Do-It instructions that help you take orders the very first hour—make good money from the start! You get Proved Selling Aids—a Book written from the practical experience of 5,000 Successful Salesmen—monthly newspaper gives hard-hitting ideas, proved successful in the field—Customer Gifts that bring "Automatic Sales"—everything to help you cash in QUICK!

ALSO SELL EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez AIR-CUSHIONED SHOES for MEN AND WOMEN

Make plenty of EXTRA money with popular, fast-selling full leather lined Chukka Boot and scores of other fine footwear styles with this wonderful Velvet-eez comfort feature! Cradles feet on thousands of tiny air bubbles, rests feet while you work or stand. Over 150 different styles for men, women, with Velvet-eez and other comfort, and style features. Full line of sport, work and dress shoes. Make extra money with smart line of shirts, raincoats, sport jackets.

National Advertising Opens Door for You

Big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping and other national magazines make you known to people as the Mason Certified Shoe Fitter. You get the benefit—we pay the BILLS!

Good Housekeeping Seal Clinches Sales for You

Mason's VELVET-EEZ shoes awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal. This Seal ends hesitation. Helps you sell more customers more items. You make more money when you handle this great Line and enjoy the support of the institution people depend on for Guaranteed Satisfaction.

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

HARRY R. WILLIAMSON WHO HAS EARNED UP TO $21.50 IN A DAY Says

"I have had many experiences where I have sold as many as 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 pairs in one sitting. I received a phone call from one party, who wanted 2 pairs of shoes. I went to his store and made 7 sales. My advance commissions on my best day were $21.50."

GET FREE OUTFIT

RUSH THE COUPON TODAY!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-616, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your exclusive Velvet-eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush FREE SELLING OUTFIT to me right away. Send everything free and postpaid. My own shoe size is:....

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-616, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

MEN! WOMEN! SENSATIONAL MONEY MAKING OFFER.

TAKE ORDERS FOR NATIONALLY ADVERTISED *NYLONS* GUARANTEED NINE MONTHS

NEW CAR GIVEN AS BONUS!!

Easy To Earn EXTRA BONUSES *Your Choice of* NEW CAR OR FUR COAT

For years we have given away new cars as a bonus over and above big cash earnings. For saleswomen who prefer them, we offer beautiful $500 Fur Coats as extra bonuses. The easiest way you ever heard of to get a new car or fur coat without paying out a single penny for it. Retail Value including Federal Excise Tax, $500.00

Hosiery for Your Own Use
...sent with Money Making Outfit

Whether you devote only SPARE TIME or give your FULL TIME to this work, it is easy for Wilknit Salespeople to get orders. Selling Wilknit Nylons is not like selling anything you ever sold before. Wilknit Nylons are covered by the most amazing guarantee your customers have ever heard. Your customers can wear out their hose. They can develop runs. They can even snag and rip them. ***No matter what happens to make Wilknit Nylons unwearable...within NINE MONTHS... depending on quantity ... we replace them free of charge under the terms of our sensational guarantee!***

No wonder women are anxious to buy Wilknit! No wonder it is easy to quickly build up a worthwhile future with STEADY year around income! EARNINGS START IMMEDIATELY — and many Wilknit Salespeople report bigger weekly earnings just in SPARE TIME than many men make in a week of full time work!

LOOK AT THESE EXCEPTIONAL EARNINGS

FOR SPARE AND FULL TIME

May McPherson, of Pittsburgh, Pa. never sold before. Gets a car as a bonus — *in addition to her earnings* — in less than 196 days. F. M. Sachs, New York, gets new car in 2 months. Mrs. Robert Franklin started out with me and made $56.00 the very first week. Mr. Codman of Rhode Island did even better. His first week's earnings amounted to $69.37. Mrs. Pete Dickson of Ohio made $81.32 her first week out and H. DeLaRoche of Calif. made $68.84 for his first week's earnings. Space permits mentioning only these few exceptional cases — but they give you an idea of the BIG MONEY that is possible in this business in the VERY FIRST WEEK!

Get FACTS Quick

You can carry a wide selection of newest shades, sizes, lengths, and gauges in genuine Nylon. You carry socks for men and hose for children, too. If you are looking for a business that you can call your own — a business that has a prospect in every home or office — a prospect in every last man and woman REGULARLY year in and year out — a business where it's easy to earn extra bonuses — your choice of NEW CAR or FUR COAT — *plus* your big daily profits, then let me hear from you quick.

FACTS FREE! SEND NO MONEY JUST SEND NAME

When you send for Selling Outfit, I send your choice of Nylons or Socks for your personal use. Rush your name for facts about this sensational line of guaranteed hosiery for men, women and children. BE FIRST in your locality. Mail coupon or a penny postcard now. ***L. Lowell Wilkin***

"Thanks for the New Ford

in addition to that, my commissions for 2 months amounted to $1,007.60."

"I am happy to have won the car in two months. My commission for two months totaled $1,007.60. I have earned as much as $50 a day and $30 a day commissions have not been unusual. It is a high privilege to represent Wilknit Hosiery Co."

Frank C. Schulz

SEND NAME AND HOSE SIZE

L. LOWELL WILKIN
WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., Inc., 439 Midway, GREENFIELD, OHIO

Please rush all facts about your guaranteed hosiery, money making plan and Bonus offer of Free Car or Fur Coat. Everything you send me now is FREE.

*My Hose Size is*_____

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ Zone___ STATE_____

WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., INC., 439 Midway, Greenfield, Ohio